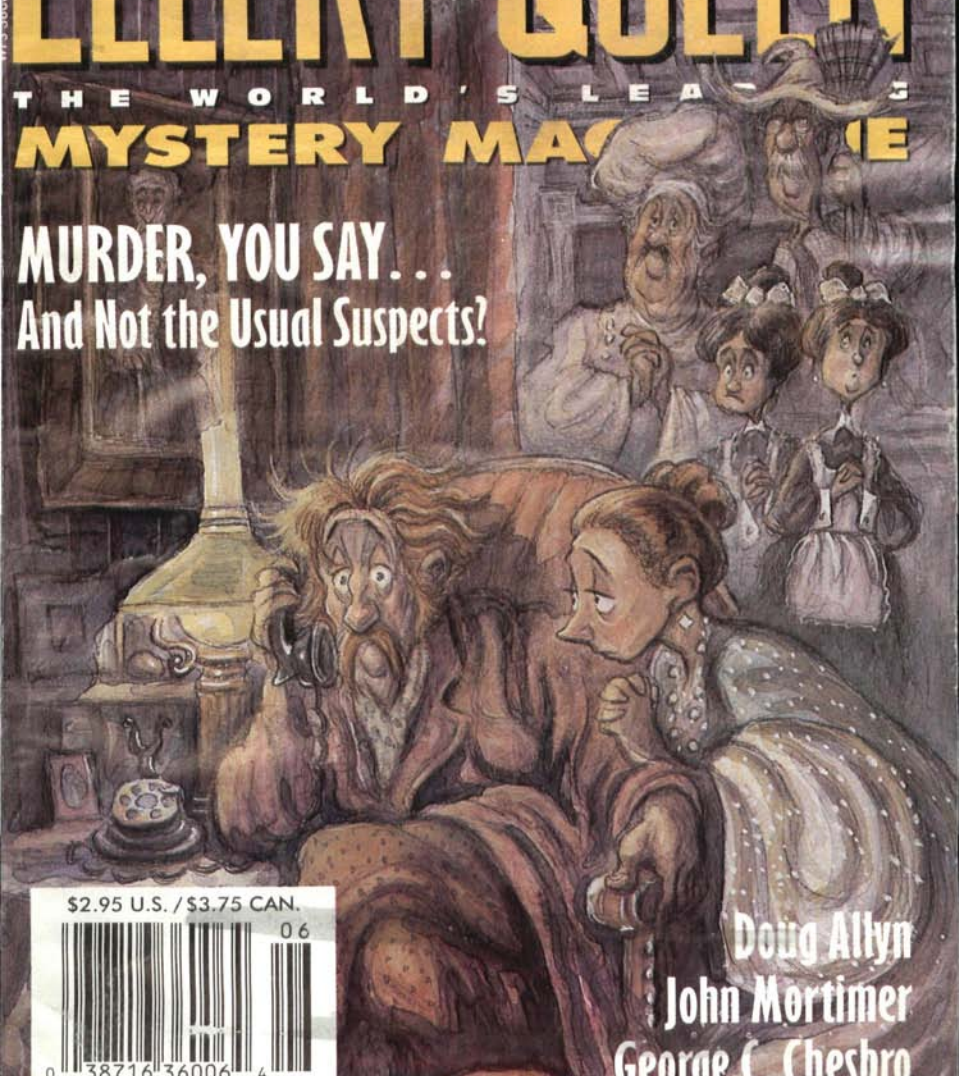


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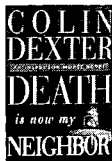
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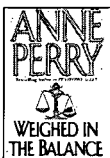
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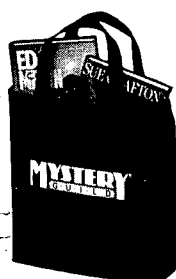
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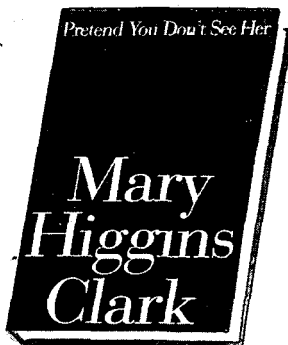


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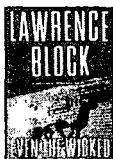
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Poetry Contest

\$48,000.00 in Prizes

The National Library of Poetry to award 250 total prizes to amateur poets in coming months

Owings Mills, Maryland – The National Library of Poetry has just announced that \$48,000.00 in prizes will be awarded over the next 12 months in the North American Open Amateur Poetry Contest. The contest is open to everyone and entry is free.

"We're especially looking for poems from new or unpublished poets," indicated Howard Ely, spokesperson for The National Library of Poetry. "We have a ten year history of awarding large prizes to talented poets who have never before won any type of writing competition."

How To Enter

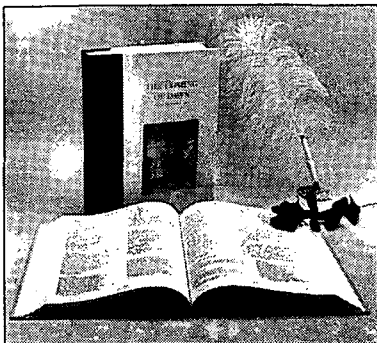
Anyone may enter the competition simply by sending in **ONLY ONE** original poem, any subject, any style, to:

**The National Library of Poetry
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Or enter online at www.poetry.com



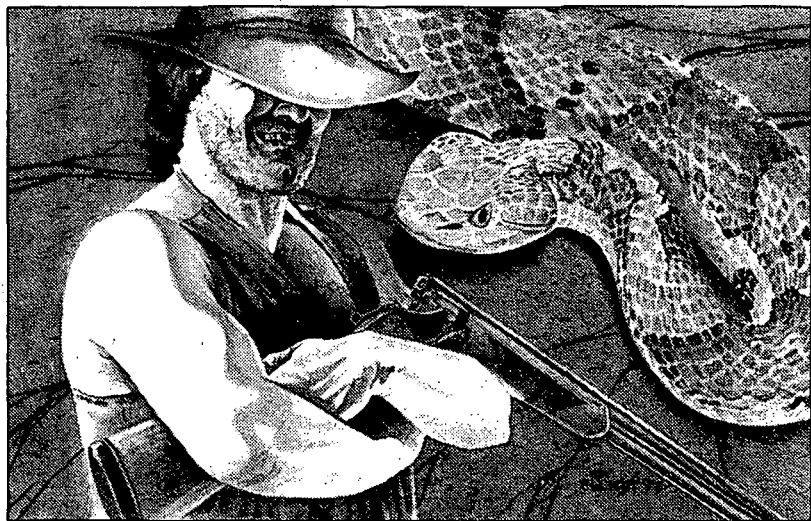
*The National Library of Poetry publishes the work of amateur poets in colorful hardbound anthologies like **The Coming of Dawn**, pictured above. Each volume features poetry by a diverse mix of poets from all over the world.*

The poem should be no more than 20 lines, and the poet's name and address must appear on the top of the page. "All poets who enter will receive a response concerning their artistry, usually within seven weeks," indicated Mr. Ely.

Possible Publication

Many submitted poems will also be considered for inclusion in one of The National Library of Poetry's forthcoming hardbound anthologies. Previous anthologies published by the organization have included *On the Threshold of a Dream*, *Days of Future's Past*, *Of Diamonds and Rust*, and *Moments More to Go*, among others.

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COPPERHEAD RUN

by Doug Allyn

The road twisted like a broken-backed snake, slick and glistening in the summer rain. On his Missouri road map it looked like the two-lane blacktop followed the river all the way to Hendrickson, but between a misty drizzle and roadside underbrush that hadn't been trimmed since Mark Twain's time, Conlan wasn't even sure which river he was following now. The Black? Hell, it could be the Mississippi for all he knew.

Admit it. You're lost as a frog in a funhouse. Should never have taken that cutoff at—whoa! Conlan cranked the wheel hard right trying to avoid a pothole the size of Ohio, but the left front tire dropped into it, the chassis bottomed out, and the car lurched out of control!

The rear end whipped around, sending the Chevy skidding broadside along the mud-slicked shoulder of the road. He fought the wheel, trying to turn into the skid. My God, which way was the

river? Last time he'd seen it, the drop to the rocks below looked like half a damned mile—

Wham! The car crashed into something, Conlan's head banged off the wheel and his world shifted into slow, slow motion. The car was still spinning, but ever so slowly now. Skidding toward the river?

He unsnapped his safety belt and scrabbled frantically at the door latch. Couldn't get it open. Had to get out! The car was . . . no. It couldn't be sliding anymore. The bushes

pressing against the passenger window weren't moving. You bumped your head and rang your bell, Conlan. Calm down.

He closed his eyes, forcing himself to cool out. When he opened them, the bushes were moving again, but only with the wind. The car had definitely stopped. His vision was blurred, couldn't seem to focus. He wiped his eyes and his fingertips came away bloody.

He twisted the rearview mirror around to check his face. A gash in his forehead was bleeding freely, trickling down into his eyes. Blast! He pressed the road map against it to staunch the flow, then unlocked his door and climbed out.

The front end of the navy blue company Chevy was crumpled against a boulder like a candy wrapper. The grille was trashed and both headlights were broken. He walked slowly around the car. Rear fender was dented too, though not as badly. He peered into the mist beyond the shoulder of the road. The ground fell away steeply, but if a river was down there it was too far below to be visible through the drizzly mist.

Terrific. He was in southern freakin' Missouri trying to locate an accident victim and he'd turned into one himself. On the upside, interviewing this victim would be easy enough.

"What happened, Mr. Conlan?"

"I got lost in the middle of noplacé, hit a hole in the road, like a moron, and wrecked my company car." The Metropole Auto and

Northern Michigan is the setting for most of Doug Allyn's short stories for *EQMM*. For a change of pace, this month he contributes a new non-series story that works its magic in the rolling hills of Missouri. Mr. Allyn's latest hardcover novel, *A Dance in Deep Water*, and his new paperback, *Black Water*, are available in bookstores now. †

Casualty insurance would cover the repairs, but he'd have to pay the deductible himself. Two hundred and fifty bucks. Ouch.

He knelt by the front wheel and scoped out the damage more closely. No sheet metal pressing against the tire. With any luck, the car should be driveable.

He climbed back into the Chevy, tilted the rearview, and examined his face again. The knot over his eye had already swollen to the size of a walnut. The blood flow from the cut had slowed, but the wound was still weeping, a bright red only slightly lighter than his own thinning hair.

Blood had splattered on his face and clothes, but the gash didn't look serious. Facial cuts always bled like butchered hogs. His shirt was surely ruined; dried bloodspots don't come out worth a damn. Thank God his jacket was on its hanger in the backseat.

As he shifted the Chevy into park to start it, a clunk from the transmission hinted that there might be some undercarriage damage. The car started immediately, but as soon as he gunned it into motion, he knew he was in trouble. The Chevy wasn't responding properly to the wheel. As it moved ahead, it kept lurching sideways, like a crab with a broken leg. Something had torn loose in the steering linkage or suspension.

No choice, he'd have to drive it the way it was. God only knew how far the next town was, and there was no way he could hitchhike in the boondocks in the rain. Between the blood and the bruises, he looked like an Irish axe murderer.

The best the Chevy could manage was twenty miles an hour, crunching along on the muddy shoulder like a stomped cockroach. He wasn't sure how long he drove—it took all of his concentration to keep the car on the road—but at some point the rain tapered off. And then he crested a hill and came to a driveway.

It wasn't much, just a dirt track, but someone had driven it recently, splattering mud on both sides of it. The road ahead made the decision for him. It was a steep grade with a sharp left turn at the bottom, with what looked like a drop straight to hell if you missed the curve. If the Chevy built up any speed on the way down, it might soar over the edge like a ski jump.

He cranked the wheel and turned into the driveway. The Chevy labored up the path for sixty or seventy yards through a dense stand of pines and aspens, then broke into the open. He'd been half expecting a tarpaper shack. Instead he found a sagging white clapboard farmhouse with a privy out back and a ramshackle barn

and toolshed off to one side. No one in sight. He stopped the car, stepped out, and tapped the horn.

A cow lowed a reply from inside the barn, but otherwise, no response. Terrific. Well, maybe somebody'd be along. He knelt beside his car, trying to spot the damage that was affecting the steering. Couldn't see anything. Cursing softly, he eased down on the damp ground and slid his shoulders under the front bumper. There it was. The right tie-rod was twisted like a pretzel—

"Hello."

Startled, Conlan banged his head against the frame. Ow! He pulled himself out from under the car.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to scare you," the woman said. "Are you all right?"

"I bumped my head," Conlan said, sitting up. "Therefore, I can't have done much damage."

"You're bleeding." The woman was in her late twenties, with gray eyes and small features, wearing a sleeveless blouse, blue jeans, and boots. Lank blond hair hung to her shoulders and she was pretty enough in a rustic way, except for a long scar that curved from her right eye to her ear lobe.

"I had an accident a ways back," Sean explained. "Did I open the cut again?"

"I'm afraid so," she said, gingerly touching his forehead. "Come up to the house, we'll get you patched up before you need a transfusion. I'm Janey Radford, by the way."

"Sean Conlan," he said, following her through the front door. "Sorry to be a bother, ma'am." She had a trim figure, but moved with a decided limp.

"Sit," she said, gesturing toward the kitchen table. The house was shabby but clean: a combination living/dining room, a small TV with rabbit ears, and mismatched furniture, early Salvation Army decor. The plastic tablecloth was embossed with a picture of Jesus at the Last Supper.

Janey ran cold water onto a towel and began daubing at his face. "You're not from around here."

"Ah, you noticed. I'm from County Cork, Ireland originally. Work out of Cincinnati, Ohio nowadays. I'm with an insurance company there. I'm down here looking into a claim."

"You're a detective?"

"An insurance investigator, actually, but I don't do much inves-

tigatin'. I mostly talk to folks and take statements about accidents they've been involved in or witnessed, that kind of thing."

"Sounds interesting," she said, gently probing the edges of the cut on his forehead.

"It was, twenty years back, when I was twenty myself. But that was a million miles and ten thousand confused and mendacious storytellers ago." Up close, Janey's eyes were a lovely liquid gray and her hair smelled fresh, recently shampooed.

"Traveling around, talking to people?" She carefully ripped the cover off a Band-Aid, placed it over the cut, then straightened, frowning at her handiwork. "That sounds like a wonderful job to me."

"It has its upsides. On occasion, I meet nice people like yourself. Am I going to live, do you think?"

"I believe so. Would you like some aspirin or something?"

"Not just now, but after I tell my boss what's happened, I may want to take a whole bottle. How far would the nearest town be?"

"That depends on how you're traveling. Catawpha's a four-mile hike over that big bluff south of the house there, but if you'd rather drive, then Noxapater's nearest, about six miles down the road."

"Is there any sort of garage in either town?"

"Mooney's, in Noxapater. It's just a little one-man shop but Mooney can fix 'bout anything. I'm afraid you can't call him, though."

"You've no phone?"

"We have one, but Mooney hasn't and he closes in half an hour."

"I don't know if my car'll make it six miles in the shape it's in anyway. Would you be havin' any tools I could borrow?"

"Tools we have, out in the shed. Are you sure you're okay?"

"Oh yes, ma'am. I've hurt myself far worse fallin' off barstools. Just point me at the tools." He followed her out to the shed, admiring the scenery and the lady both. She was a damned handsome woman, even with the limp and the scar. A pity she was wearing a wedding ring. Ah well, she was too young for him by a decade anyway.

The shed had a dirt floor but the pegboarded walls were hung with a neatly organized array of gleaming tools of every sort. A massive red twelve-drawer tool chest stood in one corner, a welding rig in the other.

"Your husband's a mechanic, then?"

"He was. He worked skilled trades for General Motors up in

Detroit the first few years we were married. He'd just gotten promoted to master mechanic when a drunk driver ran a stop sign, hit us broadside. Will and our boy were killed. My daughter and I survived, but neither of us exactly came through in one piece, as you can see."

"I'm sorry for your trouble," Sean said absently. "May I . . . ?"

"Help yourself," she said. "I have to get back to work."

"Work?"

"I handle the chores 'round here and do some quilting. Mamaw sells 'em in Springfield or St. Lou at flea markets and such. They fetch a good price and every dime helps out. Can't work a regular job, can't stay on my feet very long. We should have most anything you need here but if you can't find somethin', just holler."

"Thank you, ma'am, I think I can manage. Thanks, too, for the first aid."

She limped back to the house. He rolled an axle jack under the Chevy, raised it, then knelt to take a closer look at the tie-rod assembly. It was history. The rod was bent and the adjusting sleeve was only hanging on by a few threads. It could have gone out at any time and taken the steering with it. Lucky it made it this far.

He considered trying to weld it, but settled for hammering the tie-rod as straight as he could, then bracing the adjustment sleeve with a couple of clamps he found in the tool chest. He was tightening them down when someone stepped into his light.

A child was watching him from the doorway, obviously Janey's daughter, five or so. An older woman in a gray house dress stepped past her. She was coarse-featured, her hair drawn up in a taut bun, and her hands were work-scarred, with blunt fingers and nails clipped short. A big woman, stout as an oak and just as formidable.

"And who might you be, mister?"

"Sean Conlan, ma'am. Excuse me for not gettin' up, I'm right in the middle of something here. I had a bit of an accident and Mrs. Radford kindly offered the loan of some tools."

"What happened to your car?" She knelt stiffly, checking out the undercarriage.

"Hit a pothole, banged it up. Bent a tie-rod."

"I saw the skidmarks up the road," she said. "Figured somebody had trouble. What you doin' 'round here, Mr. Conlan?"

"I work for an insurance company, ma'am. I'm lookin' for a family named Macafee. Need some information from them."

"Ain't no Macafees in these hills."

"They live in Greensburg."

"That's nearly thirty miles south, over on the Black."

"The Black River? But I thought I was following it."

"Nossir, you musta missed a turn comin' out of Henderson. The river you been followin' is the Copperhead Run. It's a finger of the Black, flows east toward the lake country. It's easy to get lost hereabouts because the Copperhead twists around like the critter it's named after."

"The copperhead snake, you mean? Are there any around here?"

"Aplenty of 'em, but mostly higher up in the hills and woods. They're poisonous, but most times if you don't bother them, they won't bother you. You afraid of snakes, Mr. Conlan?"

"There are no snakes in Ireland, ma'am, and when I heard one might be movin' in, I left."

"Then I'd say you came to the wrong place," she said, not smiling. "I don't believe you can fix that tie-rod."

"No, ma'am, I'm just tryin' to cobble it together to get me to the next town."

"You can't make Noxapater before dark and you'd best not be drivin' these hills without headlights. A wrong turn on this road can drop you a hundred foot to the Copperhead. Ain't no place to stay in Noxapater anyway. I'm Lavina Radford. Janey's my daughter-in-law. You're welcome to put up here for the night if you like. When you finish, come up to the house for supper."

"Really, ma'am, I wouldn't want to impose."

"Helpin' strangers ain't considered an imposition 'round here, Mr. Conlan," she said, straightening stiffly. "It's a Christian duty. You wash up first, hear? And don't be trackin' no mud into my house."

"No, ma'am." He glanced from beneath the car as the woman and child walked off. And in silhouette, he realized the little girl's right arm was missing below the elbow.

Supper was basic southern cuisine: cold chicken, cornbread, and black-eyed peas. The elder Mrs. Radford said a lengthy grace before the meal and Sean kept a firm curb on his wit. The woman had no discernible sense of humor and kept eyeing him as suspiciously as a chaperone at a church social.

He tried to loosen her up a bit by regaling them with stories of the places he'd been and the oddball insurance claims he'd investigated. Janey hung on his every word, but Mrs. Radford was unimpressed.

"It's a disgrace," she said firmly. "Folks suin' one another over

nonsense, tryin' to cash in for every misfortune God or nature sends their way. It just ain't right."

"Perhaps not," Sean acknowledged, "but it's the way of the world now. If you don't mind my askin', ma'am, Janey mentioned that her husband was killed in an accident. What happened, exactly?"

"I don't care to discuss it," Mrs. Radford said.

"We have some clippin's, though, if you'd like to see 'em," Janey said, rising. Mrs. Radford started to object, then shrugged and let it pass. Janey disappeared into one of the bedrooms and returned with a couple of yellowed newspaper articles that she gave to Sean.

The pictures were grim, but the facts were basically as Janey'd told him. She'd picked up her husband at the factory where he worked; a driver whose blood-alcohol level later tested out at 2.1 ran a stop sign and broadsided them.

"Kilt my boy and my grandson, too," Mrs. Radford said quietly. "Wrecked us all, really. But these things happen, and the Lord never gives you more trials than you can bear."

"I'm sure He doesn't," Sean said. "Still, the insurance—"

"There wasn't no insurance," she said, cutting him off. "We couldn't have taken blood money for my son's death anyway. He's where he belongs now, buried on the rise back of the house here, with his boy and his father. He never shoulda gone up to that Detroit city in the first place. He'd still be with us."

"Yes, ma'am, I expect he would," Sean said, recognizing the end-of-subject edge in the woman's tone.

"We turn in early 'round here," Mrs. Radford said, rising abruptly. "Electricity comes dear in the hills. The guest room's there in the corner. There's water for washing at the sink and the privy's 'round back. Good night, Mr. Conlan."

"Good night, ma'am. And thank you again for your kindness."

"No need, it's only southern hospitality. And Mr. Conlan, we may be two women alone here, but we're not helpless. I keep a gun in my room, so I do hope you're not a sleepwalker. It would be a shame to have a second accident while you're still healin' up from the first."

"You needn't worry, ma'am, after the day I've had and your fine meal I'll sleep like the dead."

Dead wrong. Sean lay in the dark on the narrow cot half the night, his fingers laced behind his head, brooding. Visions of millions were dancing in his head. Millions. That's what this case was worth.

A master mechanic in a Motown car plant earned upwards of thirty dollars an hour, forty-five, counting overtime, which added up to lifetime earnings in seven figures. And this lawsuit would never see a jury. Once the insurance company's investigators saw Emmaline's maimed arm and the scarred young widow, they'd fall all over themselves to settle. The case was a slam-dunk, a litigator's dream.

The old woman had to be wrong about there being no insurance. Michigan was a no-fault state. If the drunk was uninsured, then either the victim's company or the state would pick up the tab. Conlan knew beyond a doubt that he was looking at a multi-million-dollar settlement here. And he couldn't touch a dime of it. If the Radfords put in a claim after all this time, the investigators would turn over every rock in the county looking for a weakness in the case. Sean's name would surely turn up and he'd be finished. Dead in the water. No company would ever hire him again. The definition of an honest investigator is one who stays bought, and despite what he'd told Janey, he liked his job. Besides, he was a bit long in the tooth to live on welfare and government-surplus cheese.

And yet, the Radfords had been kind to him. How could he not tell them about this situation? It would be like seeing Janey forget her purse on a park bench without pointing it out. What kind of man could do that?

A sleepless one. He woke in full daylight, gritty-eyed and cotton-mouthed, to the sound of Mrs. Radford's old pickup truck pulling out of the yard. It was already after nine. He dressed hurriedly.

"Morning, sleepyhead," Janey said. She was togged out in clean denim work clothes, and even minus makeup and with her hair a tangle, she looked good. A considerable accomplishment first thing in the morning.

"Coffee's on the stove. Would you like some breakfast?"

"Just coffee, thanks. Have you eaten?"

"Oh, hours ago. We're up at first light. Mamaw drops Emmaline off at school on her way to work at the rest home. There's cold cornbread if you'd care for some. I've got to get to my chores so just let yourself out. If things don't work out in Noxapater, you're welcome to stay with us again. To be honest, it gets a little lonely here sometimes. It was nice meeting you, Mr. Conlan. Y'all come back, hear?"

"Thanks again for everything, Mrs. Radford," he called after her. He watched her limp gamely toward the barn, then glanced

around the shabby but immaculate kitchen, shaking his head. They were decent people and they had a good life here. Not so good that two or three mil wouldn't improve it, but it really wasn't his problem. He couldn't help them without ruining his own life and self-preservation is the first law of nature. Or so he told himself. But it rankled. It truly did.

The road to Noxapater ran steeply downhill from the Radford farm, twisting and backtracking, with several sharp drop-offs, to the river. The Chevy fought him all the way, bucking like an unbroken horse. Each time the wheel twitched in his mitts Sean was sure the tie-rod had let go and he was about to plunge to a watery grave.

The six-mile trip took the better part of an hour. Ordinarily, Noxapater wouldn't have rated a second glance but Conlan was damned grateful to see the motley collection of ramshackle clapboard houses and the ABC Cafe, a flaking brick box across the street from an equally rundown garage. Mooney's.

He wandered through the open garage door. A pudgy bear of a black man stuffed into a gray mechanic's jumpsuit was torquing a plug under the hood of a late-model Buick.

"Mornin' to ya," he said without looking up. "I'm Mooney, and you got a tie-rod problem, right?"

"Plus the sleeve." Conlan nodded. "How did you know?"

"I could tell by the sound of 'er as you drove up. Get a fair number of 'em hereabouts. Bad roads. Don't have the part in stock. Best I can do is get it overnight from Springfield. That's the nearest dealership."

"You mean you can't fix it until tomorrow?"

"Or the day after," Mooney said, straightening. "I got a few customers ahead of you. You a travelin' man?"

"That's right, and I don't get paid by the hour. I really can't afford to lose another day."

"My regular customers don't like waitin' either."

"You seem like a reasonable man, Mr. Mooney, and I realize it's a favor I'm askin' of ya," Conlan said carefully. "Suppose we step across to the pub and discuss it over lunch? On my tab, o' course."

"Sounds fair." Mooney nodded, a gap-toothed grin dividing his ebony face. "Lemme wash up and order your part first."

There was a shriek of rubber from the street outside as a red Pontiac Firebird pulled up in front of the garage. No one got out and Sean couldn't see the driver through its blacked-out windows.



The car sat there a moment, idling, then abruptly took off again in a jackrabbit start that burned twin streaks of rubber on the road.

"Punk-ass peckerwood," Mooney said. "Ain't no way to treat good wheels. Now, 'bout that lunch you mentioned."

The ABC Cafe's retro-fifties decor consisted of Formica tables and a checker-board-tile floor minus a half-dozen squares. At Mooney's suggestion, they ordered the chili and two Bud Lites, and by the end of the meal, Mooney'd agreed to get Conlan back on the road first thing in the morning.

They were finishing their beers, chatting, when the cafe door banged open. A rangy redneck in torn jeans, a Lynyrd Skynyrd sweatshirt, and a crumpled cowboy hat stalked in, glanced around, and came directly to Conlan's table.

"That your blue Chevy parked over at Mooney's, hoss?"

"That's right," Conlan said mildly. "I had some trouble—"

"Kinda stripped down, ain't it?" the redneck interrupted. "The kinda car plainclothes cops drive." He grabbed a chair from a nearby table, reversed it, and sat down facing Conlan. Up close he was thirtyish, hard-eyed and hard-muscled, with longish sandy hair, a two-day stubble, and an attitude. "What kinda work you do, hoss?"

"Insurance. I'm Sean Conlan." He offered his hand.

"I'm Jess Walker," the redneck said, ignoring Conlan's hand. "People call me Big Red. You can call me Mr. Walker. And I don't appreciate city dudes takin' advantage of my family."

"I don't follow you, Mr. Walker."

"I'm tellin' you I don't want you hangin' around my cousin Janey's place, dirtyin' her reputation."

"Only one I know of in this town with a reputation is you, Mr. Red," Mooney put in.

"Butt out of this, Mooney. It's got nothin' to do with you."

"It surely does," Mooney countered. "Mr. Conlan here's a customer o' mine. And you ain't. His car needs fixin' and we're talkin' about it. So why don't you take that hot car o' yours on the road, Walker? 'Less you got somethin' that needs fixin'." Mooney casually slid a metal bar out of his coveralls and hefted it in his

meaty fist. Walker eyed the black man a moment, then rose abruptly.

"Ain't lookin' for no trouble with you, Mooney," he grumbled. "But you, Conlan, you'd best move on, hear?" He tossed his chair in the general direction of the next table and stalked out. A moment later a V-8 rumbled to life and the Firebird roared off with a howl of rubber.

"What's his problem?" Conlan asked.

"Bein' born mean and none too bright," Mooney said, finishing off his beer. "Big Red's nobody to mess with, though, him or his brothers. You stayin' with the Radfords?"

"They put me up last night as a courtesy."

"No harm there, they're good people. But I'd say you made Jess Walker's list. He's had eyes for Janey since her ol' man bought it up north."

"But—didn't he say he was her cousin?"

"In-law," Mooney corrected. "He's Lavina's nephew. I believe the old lady might even be tryin' to fix him and Janey up. Jess may be a no-account, but he's still kin. Hell, she even gave him that car."

"What car?"

"That red Firebird. It was Will's car, Janey's husband. 'Bout six months after the funeral, the old lady just up and gave it to Jess. Said she didn't like havin' it around. Bad memories."

"Was it the car he was killed in?"

"Nah, he was drivin' Janey's station wagon when they got hit. The Firebird was strictly Will's toy. Musta dropped twenty grand on it, settin' it up. Full race cam, headers, air shift, the works. Hot car, too nice for the likes of Walker."

"You can't choose your kin," Conlan said, "only your friends. Thank you for your help, Mr. Mooney." He raised his Budweiser in a silent toast.

"No extra charge," Mooney said, smiling. "You bring your car back in the morning, Mr. Conlan, and I'll get you back on the road directly."

After Mooney left, Conlan called his office in Cincy and the Macafee family in Greensburg and made his explanations and apologies for being late. Then he ordered a second beer, found a quiet table in the corner of the ABC, and settled in for some serious Celtic brooding.

Point one: This trip was seriously bleeding red ink. He'd be out of pocket two-fifty for the deductible on the repairs to the Chev

and he hadn't even made Greensburg yet. He'd have to drive straight through to Cincy when he finished there and work Saturdays for a month just to break even. Terrific.

Then there was the problem of the Radfords. If anyone was entitled to an insurance settlement, Janey and her daughter were. No question about it. It was a matter of simple justice. But if he helped them get the money, it would cost him his damned job and any hope of landing another. And where was the justice in that?

Even if he waited awhile, then helped them anonymously, there'd be a risk. There was no claim before he came along and afterward there was. The hard-eyed settlement adjuster would make a straight-line assumption of guilt. And the hell of it was, they'd be right.

So what were his options? Despite her scar, Janey was an attractive girl and lonely to boot. If he wooed fair maid and won, he'd end up with half the settlement. An instant millionaire with a lovely young wife. A pleasant pipe dream, but as his sainted grandfather used to say, a man who marries for money earns his wage. Besides, Janey was a nice girl. Conlan had his failings, but being an out-and-out swine wasn't one of them.

A finder's fee? Say five percent of a multi-million-dollar settlement? A possibility. His career as an investigator would certainly be at an end, but the money would make a comfy cushion to ease his transition to other work. Unless the lawyers decided to cut him out of the deal later, assuming he could talk the Radfords into it in the first place.

There was a definite risk involved in asking for a finder's fee, but it seemed better than doing nothing. Win or lose, he'd be able to face his mirror of a morning to shave. If he could still afford to lather up.

Decision made, he finished his second beer and exited the ABC. But not before checking the street for the red Firebird and Jess Walker.

The drive back to the Radford farm was slightly less hair-raising because he knew what to expect now, but it was still risky business. A curve at the foot of the hill below the farm faced a breathtaking plunge to the river below. Miss the curve and you'd be gone in a heartbeat with no time for a Hail Mary or a wave goodbye. He had a feeling he'd be dreaming about that drop this night.

He found Janey in the kitchen, slicing carrots from the garden. He offered to help, and the two of them passed the next few hours

at chores like an old married couple. There was a slow rhythm to the afternoon: the clank of the waterbucket, the drone of insects outside the screen door, the wind rustling the leaves of the aspens in the hills behind the house.

Sean still had a mild glow from the beers at the ABC and Janey seemed genuinely glad of his company. Their conversation free-wheeled from her lost husband to the poverty of Ireland, and from Erin's green hills to the rocky bluffs overlooking the Copperhead Run.

He told her of his run-in with Jess Walker in Noxapater.

"I've never cared for him much, but he's Mamaw's nephew and my husband's cousin and he's been helpful whenever things need doin'."

"I should think he would be," Sean said. "Mooney said your mother-in-law gave him Will's car."

"It was her choice," Janey said, darkening. "You've gotta understand, after Will was killed, Mamaw did everything for us. She brought us home and nursed me and Emmaline nearly 'round the clock for months. I owe her my life and maybe Emma's too. A car's a small price to pay for that."

"I understand your gratitude, but should you be letting her run your life? Perhaps even choose a new husband for you?"

"Maybe bein' from so far away it seems strange to you, but we've got our own ideas about family and loyalty 'round here. Mamaw only wants what's best for me."

"I'm sure she does, but with all due respect, she's not omniscient."

"I don't know what you mean."

"About the insurance," Conlan began, but he was interrupted by the rumble of Mamaw's pickup truck pulling into the yard. A moment later Emmaline flew through the front door and into Janey's arms, a sprite in a yellow summer dress. Lavina Radford stumped in a moment later, her square face flushed with anger, her mouth a grim line.

"You've got nerve, comin' back here, Mr. Conlan."

"I was invited, if you recall, ma'am," he answered mildly. "But I wanted to speak with you both anyway, Mrs. Radford, about insurance money. A settlement worth several million dollars."

"What are you talking about?"

"You told me you collected no insurance after your son's death because there was none, but insurance is my business and I can

assure you that there must have been liability coverage. And you're entitled to every penny of it."

"Insurance money?" Lavina spat, dumbfounded. "Blood money? Would money bring Will back? Or ease the pain in our hearts? Don't be comin' into my home tellin' lies about money after what you've done."

"And what is it I'm supposed to have done?"

"Arguin' with Will's cousin over Janey, soilin' her reputation in a public place."

"Ma'am, I can assure you that the misunderstanding I had with Mr. Walker was none of my doing."

"It doesn't matter who was at fault, the damage is done. We're God-fearing people, Mr. Conlan, but Noxapater's a small town. Folks gossip with a lot less cause than you gave 'em today. I don't mean to seem inhospitable, but you can't stay here tonight, surely you see that."

"Mamaw, you can't turn him out," Janey objected. "I invited Mr. Conlan and I don't care what the busybodies in town say."

"If you're not concerned about your own good name, then think about Emmaline," Lavina shot back. "She's the one'll be takin' the guff and evil jokes in school about her mama and the travelin' man."

"Look, I don't want to be the cause of any trouble," Sean put in. "On the other hand, it's nearly dark and my car has no headlights. I can't very well drive anywhere tonight."

"Well, you can't stay with us."

"As you wish. Suppose I spend the night in my car and leave at first light. Will that be all right?"

"That won't be necessary," Janey said.

"If your mother-in-law is uncomfortable with me in the house, then I've no wish to impose. I've slept in my car many a time. I'll be fine. I'm sorry if I've brought trouble, ladies, no harm was intended. Thank you for your kindness, and good evening."

The sun sets early in the hill country and the Radford yard was already shadowed as Sean stalked out into the cool of the dusk. Terrific. A night in the car. And yet he felt relieved as well. Because Lavina Radford's sourness had lifted the weight of obligation from him.

For good or ill, Janey was clearly willing to live her life in the older woman's shadow. That was her choice and he could even admire her loyalty. On the other hand, he no longer felt honor-

bound to trash his own career in an unwelcome effort to help them out. If they needed advice on insurance settlements, they could damned well get it from Cousin Jess.

He scrounged a half-pint of Johnnie Walker from his glove box and spent a quiet hour going over the paperwork from his past few stops while he nipped at the bottle and listened to the radio.

He wasn't invited in for supper, but Janey brought him out a couple of sandwiches and a glass of milk. She tried to make conversation but he only offered monosyllabic responses. Half buzzed on whiskey and annoyance, he let her flounder into silence. Then he thanked her graciously and pressed twenty dollars into her hand. "For the sandwiches," he said. "And the southern hospitality."

She stared at the money in confusion. He folded her hand around it, and sent her limping disconsolately off to the house.

And felt like a rat's rear end afterward. It wasn't Janey's fault her mother-in-law was a tartar. On the other hand, he was sleeping in his car when he could have had a warm bed and a pleasant evening. To hell with them.

The lights went off in the house around ten. Conlan took a last sip from the bottle, then reclined the driver's seat, draped his jacket over him, and waited for slumber to come.

Unfortunately, mosquitoes came instead. Not a swarm, just one or two, whining around his face in the dark. He'd slap at them, congratulate himself on a successful execution, then they'd miraculously reappear just as he was starting to drift off.

Which is why he was only drowsing hours later when he heard the rumble of a V-8 engine in the distance. Its voice seemed vaguely familiar and in the twilight of his consciousness it finally registered. Dead man's car. Will Radford's red Firebird. The one that Jess Walker was driving now. The thought dragged him up to the surface of awareness. And he realized the engine was running much too slowly. The car had to be moving at a crawl. Why? He checked his watch. Four A.M.

The engine idled a moment, then fell silent. And Conlan snapped fully awake, his guts twisted into a hard knot of fear. At this hour of the morning, there was only one reason Walker would be parking out on the road.

Sean had no weapons in the car, even the tire iron was under the spare in the trunk. Try for the house? By the time he could rouse the Radfords, Walker would be on him, and Conlan had no

illusions about the outcome. The backwoods roughneck had him by nearly twenty years and fifty pounds of muscle.

He silently opened the Chevy door, slid out, and bolted for the toolshed. He didn't dare risk a light, but the tools were arranged so neatly he had no trouble finding what he needed in the dark. His fist closed around a fourteen-inch crescent wrench. He tested it for balance, then shoved it in his belt. Then he groped farther along the shelf, found the spark lighter for the welding rig and a can of starter fluid. Aerosol ether.

Flattening himself against the shed door, he peered around the corner into the dark. A quarter moon was glowing through the trees on the crest of the hills to the south, dappling the yard with shifting patterns of moonglow and shadows. Conlan caught a movement in the brush along the driveway. Walker. Even in the poor light he could make him out, slinking through the shadows toward Conlan's Chevrolet. Carrying a tire iron in his fist.

The younger man was moving cautiously, his eyes probably hadn't adjusted completely to the darkness yet. Walker moved silently up to the Chevy, then yanked the driver's door open.

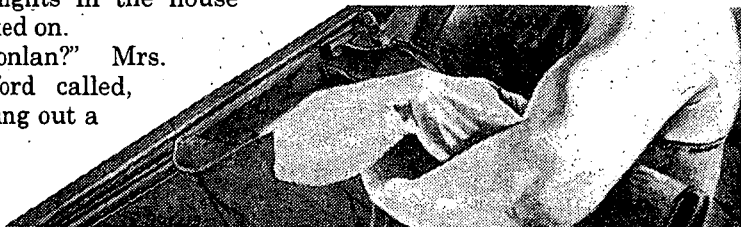
"Lookin' for me, boyo?" Conlan said, stepping up behind Walker, flicking the spark lighter as he sprayed the can of starter fluid over it.

A sheet of fire blasted out of the can, setting the seat of Walker's jeans alight. He roared in surprise and pain, whirling to face Conlan. A mistake. The fiery cloud enveloped his groin and singed his arms.

"Aaahhhh!" Flash-blinded by the flames, Walker dropped his tire iron, panicked, and ran, stumbling into the underbrush. He tripped and went down, scrambling on his hands and knees like a dog. Then he was up, pounding down the driveway with fingers of flame still flickering on his clothing, running as though the demons of hell were on his tail.

"Hightail it, ya yella bastard! Run!" Conlan yelled after him, as the lights in the house winked on.

"Conlan?" Mrs. Radford called, peering out a



kitchen window. "What on earth's all the ruckus?" Janey appeared at the front holding Emmaline in her arms. Mother and child looked tousled and lovely in the porchlight.

"Sorry to disturb you, ladies," Conlan said, sauntering up to the porch with a bit of a swagger in his step. "Had a small problem with a prowler. I sent him on his way."

"Are you all right?" Janey asked anxiously.

"Sure. He should have known better than to—"

A blast of gunfire exploded out of the dark at the edge of the yard, splintering the post beside Conlan's head.

"The lights!" Conlan yelled, diving through the open door, knocking Janey and Emmaline sprawling. "Turn off the lights!"

Mrs. Radford quickly hit the switch, plunging the yard into darkness. There were no more shots, and a moment later an engine rumbled to life and howled off into the night.

There was silence for a while, broken only by the rasp of breathing and Emmaline's soft sobbing.

"Mamaw, turn on the light."

"Not yet," Conlan objected. "He might still be out there."

"I don't care," Janey snapped. "It's Emmaline. I think I feel blood."

Mrs. Radford switched on the kitchen light. The room looked like a hurricane had blown through, windows shattered, splinters everywhere. "Scattergun," Mrs. Radford said grimly. "Did you see how it was, Conlan?"

"Jess Walker," he said, kneeling beside Janey, helping her with Emmaline.

"Oh God," Janey said, stifling a sob. "She's been hit." A bluish hole in the girl's thigh was oozing blood.

"She caught a pellet all right," Mrs. Radford said, thrusting Conlan aside. "We've got to get her to the hospital. Fetch me a blanket from the guest room, Mr. Conlan. Janey, you take Emmaline to the pickup. I'll get my keys and purse."

Conlan hurried to the guest room, snatched a quilt off the bed, and met Mrs. Radford at the front door.

"I've no right to ask, but I need a favor," she said, taking the quilt from him. "I called 911. Will you wait for the sheriff and tell him what happened? I don't want Walker to get away."

"But if he comes back—?"

"You'll find Will's thirty-thirty Winchester in my bedroom closet, Mr. Conlan, but I doubt you'll need it. The law should be along

any minute. We've got to go. Tell them we'll be at St. Luke's in Catawpha if they need us," she called over her shoulder as she hurried out the door. She scrambled into her pickup with surprising alacrity and roared out of the driveway in a hail of gravel.

Conlan watched their taillights disappear, then closed the front door and locked it. As an afterthought, he switched on the yard lights. No one in sight. His hands were trembling with delayed reaction and his knees felt suddenly rubbery. He stumbled to a rocking chair in the living room and eased down in it, trying to bring his breathing under control.

Gradually, his racing heart slowed to a trot and he began to gather his wits. He couldn't shake a sense of uneasiness, a feeling that he'd forgotten something or overlooked it. What the hell, he'd been shot at. He had a right to be shaken up.

He checked his watch. Four-thirty. The sheriff should be along shortly. But just in case he was delayed . . .

Conlan found a canvas rifle case in Mrs. Radford's closet. He laid the case on the rumpled bed, unzipped it, and took the weapon out. A lever-action Winchester, the gun of choice in a hundred American westerns he'd seen in Ireland as a boy. He'd never fired one but it didn't seem particularly complicated.

He racked the action, opening the breech and cocking the hammer. Right. He could manage it. The gun wasn't loaded so he returned to the closet and pawed through the boxes on the shelves. Photographs, old catalogues, bound packets of letters. But no ammunition. He tried the dresser next. No luck.

Frowning, he tried to guess where they'd keep a box of cartridges with a child in the house. He went out to the kitchen, stood on a chair and rifled the upper shelves of the cupboard, then tried the dressers and closets in Janey's room without success. If they had ammunition for the gun, he couldn't find it. It was nearing five o'clock. Where the hell was the sheriff?

He picked up the phone to call 911 again. The receiver was dead. No dial tone. And the reason why was obvious. The cable had been yanked out of the wall.

He stared at it, stunned. For a moment he thought Walker had somehow gotten into the house while he was searching for the ammo but the front door was still locked. No, Mrs. Radford must have pulled out the cord when she'd sent him after the quilt.

But why? The answer hammered him in the guts like a fist. Because he'd been staked out like a goat on a rope in the first

place. That's what had been nagging him earlier. When Walker'd crept into the yard in the dark, he never approached the house. He went straight for Conlan's car and yanked open the door, expecting to find him inside. But how would he have known he'd be in the car? Unless he'd been told.

Sweet Jesus! The old witch wanted him gone badly enough to set him up for a beating or worse. And now he was alone in the middle of nowhere with an empty rifle and no way to phone for help. And Walker would surely be back. Otherwise the old lady wouldn't have gone to the trouble of setting up this trap.

Walker'd be here soon. Before dawn, certainly, because Conlan could drive off at first light. Even now he could risk it, but it was a poor bet. His car was barely driveable, he didn't know the roads, and one missed curve in the dark would be the end of him. But he couldn't just wait here like a bug in a box either. There had to be a way out.

Catawpha was only four miles away, if you hiked through the hills behind the house, Janey'd said. But Walker would know that as well, and he had younger legs. Unless there was a way to keep him from following. . . .

The glimmerings of a plan were forming in the back of Sean's mind as he ransacked the house for a flashlight. He found one in the kitchen drawer and started for the door, then hesitated. None of this was Janey's doing. She was entitled to that insurance money, and by God, he'd get her out from under the old woman's thumb if it killed him.

He raced into Mrs. Radford's bedroom and rifled the top drawer of her dresser for the envelope of clippings he'd noticed during his ammunition search. The information they contained would make any competent claims attorney jump through hoops for the chance to take Janey as a client and negotiate a multimillion-dollar settlement for her.

He found the envelope and riffled through the collection to be sure he had the right one. But he didn't. These weren't the clippings Janey'd showed him the night before.

"Detroit man dies in hit-and-run," one headline read. "Pedestrian killed, alcohol suspected," said another. Pedestrian?

Conlan quickly scanned an article. The dead man wasn't Will Radford, his name was Ronald Bankowski, age fifty-four, killed in a hit and run accident involving a stolen car. But the name was familiar. . . .

No time. Sort it out later. Conlan stuffed the packet of clippings into his breast pocket, sprinted out to his Chevy, and fired it up.

Gunning it around, he roared out of the driveway, skidded out onto the road, and stopped, facing downhill toward Noxapater. He snatched the crescent wrench out of his belt, forced the gas pedal to the floor, and laid the wrench on it to hold it down. The engine revved up to a howl.

Conlan took a deep breath, then shifted the car into drive and leapt clear as the Chevy rocketed down the hill like a racehorse on amphetamines. The engine was still roaring when the car plunged over the drop at the first curve and tumbled end over end through the trees, smashing its way to the rocky river below.

The trail of spilled gasoline ignited with a *whuff*, turning the car into a fiery beacon in the night. With luck, when Walker came back and found the Chevy gone, he'd assume Conlan had panicked and driven off for a last ride to hell. He'd probably climb down to the car to be sure, and by that time . . .

The first hour of the climb was the worst as Conlan fought through the scrub brush of the tall bluff by the wan gleam of the flashlight. But by and by the east began to glow, suffusing the horizon with the first hints of dawn light so that he could keep to the path without the light.

The footing was tricky, yet he found it hard to concentrate on it. His thoughts kept returning to the name in the article. Bankowski. Where had he heard it? And as the sun finally crept above the treeline, he remembered.

He hadn't heard it, he'd read it. That first night when Janey'd showed him the clipping about Will's accident. Bankowski was the name of the drunk driver who'd broadsided them. And killed Will Radford and his son.

He stopped long enough to check the clipping, but he knew he was right. Bankowski was the driver all right. And six months later he was a victim himself. Of an unsolved hit-and-run.

Unsolved until now. Conlan could almost see it develop. Mrs. Radford's boy and her grandson had been killed, and Janey and Emmaline had been terribly injured. And yet driving drunk would only net Bankowski a fine and a short stretch in a county lockup, if that.

And so Will's mother had almost certainly arranged for justice of her own. Southern Missouri style. Bankowski was run down and killed a few months later. And soon after, Lavina Radford had

given her son's twenty-thousand-dollar Firebird to his cousin, Red Walker. And that had been the end of it.

Until Conlan blundered into their lives with his talk of millions in insurance money. It wasn't the money the old woman was afraid of, it was the scrutiny that it would bring. She simply couldn't risk it. And she was right. There was no way an insurance company would pay off without turning over every rock and leaf in—Conlan stopped. Dead.

He froze in his tracks as though he'd been lightning-struck, heart pounding, afraid to move. For a moment, he wasn't even sure why he'd paused or what was wrong. And then he saw them.

Snakes. Copperheads. Thick-bodied, three or four feet long, with bronze and beige hourglass patches. Four snakes. No, five. My God. He was fifty yards or so below the top of the bluff on a stony outcropping. If he'd still been traveling by flashlight, he'd never have seen them. Though none were actually on the path, they were definitely near enough to strike as he passed.

He caught a movement out of the corner of his eye. A copperhead came slithering out of the rocks to his left. He watched, petrified, as it crawled past him only a few feet away. It stopped in a pool of morning sunlight, coiled slowly, and lowered its spade head to bask in the sun's rays. Off to his right, another movement. More snakes? He couldn't tell.

God almighty, he had to get out of here! But which way? His first instinct was to wheel and sprint back down the trail as fast as his legs could carry him. But that was no solution. If there were snakes moving about behind him he could easily stumble over them in the brush. Here, at least he could see them.

No. His best chance was to move ahead. To get through them, somehow. What had Mrs. Radford said about copperheads? If you don't bother them, they won't bother you? Easy to say. Not so easy to believe when they're closing in on you like rats to a roadkill.

But were they? He was too terrified to be absolutely certain, but the snake that'd crossed in front of him hadn't paid him any particular heed, nor did the others seem threatening, except for the one that first caught his attention by raising its head when he stepped onto the rocks. The others seemed more interested in warming themselves in the morning light. So if he moved ahead very slowly . . .

Right. That was the logical move. But gentle Jesus, what if

there were more snakes waiting above? He stood frozen in place, bathed in icy sweat, dazed and paralyzed by fear.

The decision was made for him when two more snakes came slithering out of the rocks on his right. He simply couldn't wait any longer.

Taking that first small step may have been the bravest thing Conlan had ever done. And the second was no easier. He moved ahead by inches, trembling, afraid to breathe. He covered a yard, then another. Suddenly one of snakes near the path reared its head in menace, flicking its tongue, casting back and forth, preparing to strike. He froze, his heart racing like a runaway train. Don't move! Think!

Make eye contact? Avoid it? He couldn't remember which was correct. The snake's tongue was flickering in and out hypnotically . . . the tongue. He remembered something about snakes' tongues being used for scent rather than taste. What did that mean? Probably that the copperhead was nervous. Which might be a very bad sign. But not as bad as staying here would be. More snakes were materializing out of the shadows. He had to move.

He decided to avoid the copperhead's glittering gaze, to focus only on the next step, the next few inches of stony ground. He shifted his right foot ahead as delicately as he could, trying not to alarm the viper. And then took another step. And a third. The snake watched him pass warily, but didn't strike.

Another copper head raised up in a soulless threat, but this time Conlan didn't stop. With his eyes riveted on the path, he crept along. Praying in a whisper. Holy Mary, mother of God . . .

Crossing the shelf at a snail's pace took the better part of an hour. A lifetime. Occasionally a whisper of breeze rustled the bushes like a thousand hisses, shifting the shadow patterns on the stony ground until it seemed that the very earth was teeming with reptiles. And yet Sean shuffled on like an automaton, terrified of moving, but even more afraid of stopping and being overwhelmed.

Conlan was so shaken that when he reached the path that led up to the crest of the bluff, he wasn't sure his wobbly knees had the strength for the climb. But somehow he managed it, one small step after another, afraid to reach for handholds for fear of being struck from the shadowy rocks along the path.

Then, suddenly, shockingly, he stepped into full sunlight on top of the hill. The breeze was fresh and brisk up here, and the ground was covered with sawgrass. He glanced warily around,

scanning every square inch, but there were no snakes in sight. Probably too windy for their cold-blooded natures. Thank God.

He was shaken by a sudden weakness, an ague of relief. His legs went rubbery, and he found himself fighting back tears. He'd made it. Somehow, he'd made it.

He turned back and gazed over the rim of the bluff to the stony shelf below. It was seething with copperheads now, dozens of them, basking, dozing, dreaming of . . . Only Satan knows what snakes dream of.

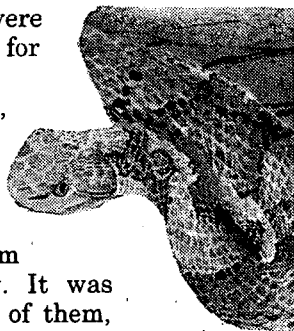
Beyond the shelf and the brushy slopes below, the glistening curves of the Copperhead Run coiled through the verdant countryside like a great reptile. Conlan stared at it for a very long while, lost in its beauty as waves of relief swept over him.

He'd almost died down there. And for what? For money? For witness reports and insurance forms and lawyers' fees? For a few damned bits of paper, that's all. Nothing more. A movement from the shelf below caught his eye as one of the snakes shifted its position to better enjoy the sun.

A wise creature, the snake, though greatly maligned since Adam's time. Let it alone, and it will do the same for you. He considered his own situation. He'd been ready to sacrifice his livelihood in order to make Janey Radford a rich widow. A noble gesture. But one she hadn't asked for, and would never accept if it came at the price of her mother-in-law's imprisonment.

And Walker? He was a murderous bastard, definitely, but not an indiscriminate one. Certainly no worse than the snakes spread out peacefully on the rocks below. Let us alone, and we'll let you alone. Sound advice. If Eve had taken it back in Eden the world would be a far better place.

Conlan took the newspaper clippings out of his breast pocket, eyed them a moment, then tore them in two, and then again, and yet again. And then he raised his hands, scattering the scraps to the wind, sending them whirling and dancing like snowflakes in the sunlight, spiraling down and down over the valley below, and the glittering waters of the Copperhead Run. ●



THE HOUSE OF CREE

by Peter Turnbull

THURSDAY—10:15 A.M.

Piper turned Papa Tango Foxtrot into the leafy suburban lane in well-set Shawlands. Beside him he felt Constable Hamilton stiffen with apprehension. But both cops knew that it couldn't be worse than the worst that they had attended. The worst that they had attended had had a locus north of the water, in Kelvinbridge. The guy in question had money, he had divided his time between his rambling Victorian mansion in Kelvinbridge, his steel ketch, which he kept on the Clyde estuary, and his renovated farmhouse in Tuscany. His neighbours were not at all unused to his being away from home for weeks at a time, so only when they noticed that the house in Kelvinbridge appeared not to have been occupied for some months did they call the police. When Hamilton and Piper had gained entry they first came upon a handwritten note pinned to the kitchen door which read: "Do not go beyond this point—call the police," and entering the kitchen, Hamilton and Piper had found the corpse hanging by the neck from a thin nylon cord which had been attached to a roof beam. The corpse was in an advanced state of putrefaction, the hands were turned up like claws, and on the floor was a black carpet of dead flies. By the corpse was another handwritten note which read: "There's just nothing left to live for." Later, after listening to counsel lead learned depositions, the sheriff who conducted the

The following story belongs to a series that has received wide critical acclaim. As *Publishers Weekly* said: "Forcefully combining the percolating violence of his industrial strength locale with the inherent compassion of the Glasgow Police P Division, whose personal lives are made discordant by a cacaphony of subtle ills, Turnbull continues quietly to dazzle with this fine series." †

fatal accident inquiry recorded a finding of suicide caused by the onset of the syndrome known as "achievement depression," wherein the sufferer spends a lifetime motivated by the achieving of a goal, and then, having achieved that goal, can find no purpose to life, often despite the accumulation of fabulous wealth. But Piper and Hamilton knew that this call wouldn't be a repeat of that incident, it couldn't be, if only because on this case it had only been three days since neighbours had seen the occupant of the house. Nonetheless, the request caused a knot of apprehension in the stomachs of Piper and Hamilton, as it would in the stomach of any cop. "... householder hasn't been seen for three days, neighbours concerned ... please attend."

Piper slowed the area car to a halt beside a small group of members of the public, all in their middle years, all looking genuine in their concern for the welfare of Sonia Cree of 32 Maple Terrace, Shawlands, Glasgow, G41. The cops got out of the car and appealed for a group spokesman. It was, they knew, always the way of it when a crowd gathers, as here or at a road accident, a leader emerges, organising, delegating, looked to by the others. This case was no exception. When Sergeant Piper asked for a spokesman, the group edged backwards or to the side so that a man in a tweed jacket and holding a Highland Terrier on a leash was distinguished.

"Haven't seen her for a day or two," said the man. "We, being her neighbours. Nothing has moved in the house, curtains have remained shut, as you see them now. We've called through the letter box, no reply. It's got a kind of cover over it so we can't look into the hall, can't really see into the house because of the net curtains."

"I see." Piper surveyed the house. Semidetached, stone-built villa. "Does she live here by herself?"

"No, she and her husband live here. Mr. and Mrs. Cree, a couple in their thirties. Don't know what he does for a living."

"He has business interests," a woman with a round hat offered. "Exactly what I can't say."

"No children?" Hamilton asked. He recalled yet another call from similarly concerned neighbours which had revealed itself to be a murder/suicide, wife and children strangled, the man with his head in the gas oven.

"No," said the woman; "no children." Hamilton breathed a brief sigh of relief.

An Aer Lingus Boeing with landing wheels lowered whined slowly overhead on its final approach to Glasgow Airport. Hamilton found time to reflect that no one would be talking on the plane at the moment; conversation halts as the plane descends and springs up again at the relief of a safe and successful landing. Whenever Hamilton had flown, it had always been his personal fear that the crew would forget to put the wheels down when landing.

"But you're only concerned about the lady, Mrs. Cree?"

"Mr. Cree is away."

"Ah . . ."

"He went on Monday morning, I saw him depart. . . . Mrs. Cree said he was attending a week-long sales symposium in Edinburgh. I saw Mrs. Cree on Tuesday afternoon, that's when she told me her husband was in Edinburgh all this week," the woman in the round hat told Piper. "We had a wee blether in the butcher's."

"So," Piper thought aloud, "Thursday morning now, she was last seen Tuesday . . . the curtains remained shut all day yesterday."

"Aye," said the man in the tweed jacket, "no lights in the house last night."

"Right." Piper turned to Hamilton. "I think we go in. Trouble is, these semi villas are built like Fortress Europe."

"Back of the house," said the woman in the round hat who had had a blether with Mrs. Cree in the butcher's on Tuesday. "At the back of the house."

"I'm sorry?"

"There's an insecure sash window, doesn't lock, Mrs. Cree complained that her husband wouldn't sort it. It can be slid up very easily. She said if they ever got burgled, it'll be on his conscience not hers. She said she nagged him about it enough that her conscience would be clear."

"You don't say," Sergeant Piper said. "Back of the house it is."

Hamilton and Piper crunched over the gravel at the rear of the house and tested first one window and then the next until they came to the insecure sash window of concern and repute. It slid up quite easily, if a little noisily, allowing room for a well-built man to clamber into the house. Hamilton drew back the curtain and caught his breath.

"Trouble?" growled Piper.

"Aye." Hamilton surveyed the room, the wrecked furniture, the

torn and ripped upholstery, the spray-painted walls. "See for yourself."

Piper did so. "This is done by people who call the police pigs. And there's a woman in there, too. I've got a bad feeling about this one, a very bad feeling. All right, in you go, Constable, but don't touch anything unless you have to,—this is a crime scene."

Hamilton levered himself through the window. Piper followed him. They stood in the room, then walked gingerly across the carpet to the hall.

The lady of the house was in the hall.

The lady of the house was lying on the floor.

The lady of the house was lying with her eyes and mouth open.

The arms and legs of the lady of the house had risen off the floor.

The lady of the house was dead.

The cops looked down on the corpse, dressed in night clothing. Sergeant Piper reached to the radio attached to his collar. "Control, 245 Piper."

"Control receiving . . ." a female voice crackled over the radio.

"Control, 245 Piper, we're at the location, house of Cree, 32 Maple Terrace, Shawlands, request CID attendance. Apparent code four one."

The camera flashed.

"What price dignity now?" Reynolds mused as he looked at the corpse, the nightwear ridden up, the limbs risen in rigor. He turned to DC Richard King, a chubby, bearded detective, found by many to be mature beyond his twenty-five years. "What do you think happened? Murdered by burglars? Murdered while defending her property?"

"It looks that way, sir," Richard King nodded. "You can see the state of her house and it's this that gets me, the aggravated burglaries. It's not enough that the neds have to break into folks' houses and steal, they've got to wreck the place, defile it, spray paint everywhere, and in this case they murder the householder."

"And maybe rape as well." The tall, silver-haired pathologist raised an eyebrow. "It's happened before, and as you see, she had no clothing on to speak of, just the one thin nightie, I believe they're called. Well, all I can do is to take a rectal temperature and note the room temperature, then I'll have the body removed to

the GRI, ready for the postmortem. I presume that you want her identified before I start cutting her up?"

"If you don't mind, sir. I think we'll be able to do that rapidly. We believe we know who she is, it's just a matter of contacting her husband, who's believed to be in Edinburgh. That ought to be done in an hour or two. Could you give us anything to go on?"

"It looks like strangulation to me, massive bruising about her throat, bulging eyes, open mouth. I can't see any other injuries. I won't be able to tell you about the rape possibility until I've done a vaginal swab, but even that might be inconclusive because rapists are using condoms now, not so much because they are frightened of catching AIDS, but because they know their DNA signature can be extracted from their semen. But I'll do a swab anyway. Going by the rigour, death occurred within forty-eight hours."

The camera flashed again as the scene-of-crime officer turned his attention from the corpse and began to document the damage to the house.

"It's a wonder the neighbours didn't hear anything." Reynolds knelt and took a rectal thermometer from his bag. "I mean, this sort of damage is not done in silence. The victim must have screamed as soon as she realised her house was being invaded."

"Aye, it's puzzling, right enough." King stroked his beard, and had a sudden flash of concern for his wife and infant son. "Anyway, I'll let you press on, sir."

Richard King went from room to room. It was, at least had been, a well-appointed house, deep pile carpets, now spray-painted with many colours, walls of gentle pastel shade now covered in wavy lines of hard blue, loud red, and yellow. The furniture, expensive, slashed and scarred with the blades of many knives. He went upstairs; lines of spray paint ran up the wall beside the staircase. There was paint over the mirrors in the bathroom, in the bath and shower cubicle, the plastic surround of which had been slashed with long gashes. The bedroom had been violated, the paint had been sprayed over the French polished wardrobe, on the clothes themselves, round a painting, but the mirror had been criss-crossed, the bedding torn and shredded.

He wondered if the woman had been forced to watch the defiling of her home prior to being murdered, or had the murderer or murderers committed the damage after murdering her, still high on a killing frenzy? He hoped the latter, for her sake. He also wondered about the mind or minds of the men and/or women who could do

this. Motivated by envy perhaps, not being able to have the trappings of the good life, so no one else could either, an "If I can't have it, I'll destroy it" attitude.

He wondered about the woman's husband, now being located. Some cop would have to break the news to him, perhaps it would be a fresh-faced laddie, proud in his uniform, who never before had seen a grown man cry.

He returned to the ground floor of the house and met the awkward-moving, heavily lensed Elliot Bothwell.

"Plenty of prints," said Bothwell, "but also a lot of gloved hands. I'd say that all the latents will prove to belong to the householders and legitimate visitors. The villains will have worn gloves."

"They watch television then," said King with a clear note of cynicism that surprised Bothwell, who had always enjoyed a high-minded attitude he had observed in King. "Time to quiz the neighbours," King added. "One of them may have heard something."

"Heard them all the time, all the time." The grey-haired woman spoke with a thin, irritating voice which Richard King would find difficulty living with if he had to do so. "Shouting, yelling, china being smashed, oh my . . ."

"Not a happy union?" King sat in the old armchair, opposite the woman, over whose shoulder, through the polished pane of glass, he could see the locus, the police officer on the door, the people walking past who could not help but stare.

"Not a happy union," the woman echoed. "I heard them from across here. Oh my. Mind, I sleep in the front, above this room, so I heard them clearly. I confess I don't ken why they stayed with each other. I couldn't cope with a marriage like that. See, me and Frank, my man, that's him and me on the mantelpiece when we were new, oh, some man. No woman could have had a happier time than me. I had forty happy years with Frank, my man, before he went before, and we had three beautiful children . . . so here's me and I lay in my bed at night, listen to they two and I think, well, I might be a widder-woman with my weans flown, all alone in this big house, but I can only think myself lucky for the life I've had. . . . See them, they two, I don't need to switch on the six o'clock news to stop myself feeling sorry for myself in my old age, not with them across the street."

"When did you last hear them row?"

"Last . . . see, Thursday now . . . a wee while to be sure . . . maybe . . . It was Saturday, see, that's why their house has been quiet all week, he's been away. I saw him go on Monday morning, him and his suitcase."

"You saw her after he'd left?"

"Och aye, saw her on Monday evening. She looked happy. Always did when he was away. Saw her Tuesday afternoon. Didn't see her after that. But saw lights in their house on Tuesday evening."

"Any suspicious noises, within, say, the last forty-eight hours?"

"Since lunchtime on Tuesday?"

"About that."

"A car in the night, Tuesday, Wednesday night. I heard it drive up, stop outside. I heard a key in a door, which door I couldn't say. It's amazing how sound travels at night, how the houses distort the sounds as well. A sound coming from my side of the street could easily be coming from across the street."

"I see, but this was in the late hours of Tuesday or the small hours of Wednesday?"

"Aye, wee small hours of Wednesday because it woke me up. I never go to sleep until I've heard the shipping forecast. My son's at sea, I like to know what the weather's doing. So I never sleep until after the shipping forecast which is broadcast at midnight. I ken the sound of the car woke me up, so it was in the wee hours of yesterday."

King scribbled on his notepad.

"I daresay Mr. Cree will be coming home soon."

"We don't know where he is," said King, "exactly."

"He's in Edinburgh." The man's manner was that of a young thruster, sleekly turned out, even in leisure wear, and young to have a house in this street. Still in his twenties, thought King.

"Edinburgh?"

"Aye, Auld Reekie, the very same. He sells photocopiers and fax machines and equipment like that. They're having a week-long sales convention in Edinburgh. It's an international do, reps from all corners of the globe. He was in the pub moaning about it, reckoned he could do with a trip to the States, or New Zealand, but where do they hold the convention, he says, forty minutes' drive away from his house. That's where. No justice, he said."

"Do you know which hotel?"

"Aye, the new one by the airport. What's it called? The Chase, that's it."

"Thanks," said King, "we'll contact him there. We'll get the information to the Lothian and Borders police. All we could tell them was that he was at a convention in the capital, not much for them to go on. You didn't see anything suspicious in the last few days, since Tuesday evening?"

"Can't say that I did." The young man leaned on the fence between his house and the Crees' house.

"Or hear anything?"

The man pursed his lips. "I did hear a car start up on the Wednesday morning. Early start, and it drove off at some speed."

"Anything about the car?"

"Well, it wasn't Ian Cree's car."

"It wasn't?"

The man shook his head. "Definitely not. Ian drives a Granada, big Ford, it glides along, doesn't make a sound; this was smaller, noisy engine."

"I see. No other noises?"

"No. All things were quite silent, for a change. The Crees were a house divided."

"So I gather."

"Constant rows. And I mean constant. Mind you, I got the impression that they needed it like that. Maybe I'm wrong, but I've heard of relationships like that being seen as successful by the people in them, they can only communicate like that, such people tend to be into the theatricals."

"I wouldn't want to comment." King felt his distaste for coffee-tale psychology beginning to rise. "What did they row about?"

"Money."

"They didn't look short."

"They both work. He's in sales, she has a hairdressing salon. She pulls down more money than him. She says. Sounds penetrate these walls. When they're at full cry it's like being in the same room; we learn to keep our noise down in Maple Avenue. The fire walls between the houses are only one line of bricks thick. It's not enough to dampen the sound. Anyway, recently she's been going on about subsidising him, that she's 'bringing home the bacon—call himself a breadwinner?' . . . that sort of argument. Really putting the poor guy down. Daresay that's what he meant about needing a trip to New Zealand. You know that woman . . . I

couldn't have lived with her, she knew how to sink the knife in and twist it. She had a tongue that could open a safe. . . . To see her in the street, all dolled up, nice to speak to . . . but they two at home, she had a tongue. . . ."

"I see," said King. "That's really interesting."

Richard King returned to P Division police station at Charing Cross, signed in, and took the stairs two at a time to the CID corridor on the first floor. He went to DI Donoghue's office. He tapped reverently on the open door and stepped into the office when Donoghue said "Come." Fifteen minutes later, Donoghue rekindled his pipe, and laying his gold-plated lighter on his desk he said, "So, let's kick it about a bit. To me it has all the hallmarks of an aggravated burglary that went badly wrong. I assume entry was made via the insecure sash window at the rear of the house where the uniformed officers made entry?"

"There's no sign of forced entry, sir. I think that that is the point of entry is a safe assumption to be made until we know otherwise."

"Any hint of the ID of the perpetrators?"

"None. Well, none as yet, but the person or persons that did that must have some track. You don't make a mess of someone's house like that as a first offence. Our problem here is that the forensic science officer didn't take too long to determine that the perpetrators wore gloves."

"Anything stolen?"

"Nothing that's obvious to myself. TV and hi-fi and VCR still there, jewellery still in the jewellery box. It'll need the husband to tell us if anything has been stolen."

"Where is he now?"

"At a conference in Edinburgh. We know which hotel he's at and I've asked the Lothian and Borders police to break the news. I've asked them to offer to escort him back to Glasgow, he may be too distressed to drive."

"I can imagine."

"He'll have to ID the deceased to determine her identity, that'll be painful, and then he'll have to go and see his house, that'll be painful as well. It's about the worst I've seen, spray-painted with three different colours, sofa ripped to shreds, bedding ripped. . . ."

"What do you think happened, Richard? Neds broke in, wrecked

the place out of badness, murdered her when they discovered her in the house?"

"No, I don't think that's what happened. I think her husband murdered her."

Donoghue paused. He nodded his head slowly. He tapped the ash from his pipe into his tray and refilled his pipe. As he lit it with his lighter he said, "I think you'd better tell me."

"Well," King shifted in his seat. "It's not one thing, it's an accumulation. All the pieces seem to arrange themselves into a very interesting jigsaw . . ."

"Tell them, in any order."

"Well, firstly, the assumed point of entry. The sash window may well be insecure, but it has to be approached by walking on gravel. Burglars do not walk on gravel, they just don't. And if they did gain entry via the window in question they wouldn't shut it behind them. Yet our officers encountered it in the closed position." Donoghue listened intently.

"Then there's the victim, Mrs. Cree, found downstairs, wearing only her nightdress—no gown, no slippers—just as though she had slid out of bed and went downstairs for some reason, but had no fear of what it was that induced her to go downstairs."

"Go on."

"That she went downstairs at all is interesting: a woman alone in her home at night hears burglars, she would have done the sensible thing and locked herself in the bathroom. If she had time she would have phoned the police from the phone she had by the bed."

"She had a phone by the bed?"

"She did, sir."

"All right, you're carrying me with you so far; we'll go along with the assumption that she knew her murderer but saw no reason to fear him, or her."

"The next point is the method of murder, which looks as certain as it can be without a full postmortem as being strangulation. And strangulation is a crime of passion. In my experience, when an aggravated burglary turns into murder it's because the burglar panics and stabs the householder, or brings a blunt object down on her head with great force, but strangulation is very emotionally charged. You really have to hate someone to strangle them."

"That's a good point." Donoghue smiled his approval.

"Another point is that nothing appears to have been stolen. Nothing is obviously missing. Now, two neighbours heard a car in

the street in the early hours of Wednesday. The car was heard to arrive, a key turned in a lock, and later the car was driven off. Nobody could say for certain which house was entered, but it could have been the house of Cree."

Donoghue pulled on his pipe. He glanced out of his window up the length of Sauchiehall Street, the angular buildings, the thronged pavement, the traffic bumper-to-bumper.

"It would explain a lot," King continued, "if Ian Cree arrived home, let himself in, called up to the bedroom along the lines of 'Don't be alarmed, it's only me' . . . then Mrs. Cree would have come downstairs just as she was, full of curiosity and indignation. . . ."

"Seems fair enough . . . he's in Edinburgh . . . an hour's drive away. Do the deed in three hours and back for a sleep before breakfast, getting up as though nothing had happened."

"That's what I'm thinking, sir. But I've saved the best till last."

"Confess I thought you had the look of the cat that got the cream about you."

King smiled. "Well, sir, the best bit is something that didn't occur to me until later. At the time it didn't look right, but I didn't see the significance. In the main bedroom is a painting. It's not a print, not a reproduction of a famous work of art, it's an original, and it's framed but the frame doesn't have a sheet of glass. The painting is open to the elements, as it were."

"I see."

"The house has been spray-painted, across the walls, across the mirrors, across the front of the television screen, across the bedroom wall towards the painting, then a line of spray goes round the painting and then picks up its original course. It's as if the painting was a valued possession of the person who was spray-painting the walls."

Donoghue nodded. "Whereas a villain doing the spray-painting would have found the picture an irresistible target. Very good point, Richard. I'm impressed. That's good enough for me. By itself that's enough to bring Mr. Cree in for a quiz session, but along with all the other points you've mentioned, yes, I think you're right. Ian Cree murdered his wife. Any ideas about a motive?"

"Highly stressed marriage, by all accounts. Both worked. He had trouble bringing in the bacon, she was coining it in and she was rubbing his nose in it, tormenting him, ridiculing him about his inability to earn money, so their neighbour was able to advise us."

"Aye," Donoghue placed his pipe in his ashtray. "It's the sort of

thing that would get under a man's skin. I can imagine little worse than being thought of as a man who can't do. Little worse."

"I think that it would also explain the passion that went into the method of murder. He'd want her to know who was murdering her and why."

"And it would fit with the statistic, what is it, ninety percent of murders are committed by people who live as part of the same household as their victim, or have some other close relationship if they don't actually live under the same roof? Something like that. Where is Cree now?"

"That I don't know, sir, and I can't say that I'm too bothered. By now he must have been informed of his wife's death by the Edinburgh boys, who will have asked him to make contact with us. That he hasn't arrived yet means he must have declined their offer of an escort to Glasgow. But he won't be going on a murderous rampage, so I think we can wait for him to surface full of grief and distress for his lost love. I thought that in the interim I'd take a drive out to the Chase Hotel, it's near the airport, this side of the city. See if any member of the hotel staff is able to throw light on Mr. Cree's movements on the night of Tuesday/Wednesday this week."

The Chase Hotel was a newly built property, landscaped gardens, fountains inside and out, cashing in on Edinburgh's growing international reputation as a conference centre.

"He did, yes," said the porter in crimson jacket and black trousers. "I was on duty. One of the night porters had phoned in sick. I was offered his shift at double time, it just meant extending my back shift from ten P.M. until six A.M. Nothing to it. In fact, I was able to snatch a couple of hours sleep from three until five and that carried me through. Went home for a long sleep and was back on duty at two P.M. Helped to pay the gas bill."

"But Mr. Cree left in the early hours?"

"Aye, so he did. He asked me to hire a car for him, cheapest I could get, he said, so it wasn't coming out of his expense account, but a lot of them did that. Hire a cheap car to go down to saunas in Leith. See, those guys, once they're away from their wives . . . and they hire a cheap car because it doesn't do to take a flash motor into Leith at night, not if you're going to leave it parked for the length of time those guys spend in a sauna. Mr. Cree drove off in the hire car at about half-past midnight, looking serious, sort of intense. Came back late, about five-thirty. He'd been further than

Leith for his jollies, or had had a lot of them, he was looking shaken, white-faced . . . Later he phoned down from his room, said he was ill and asked that a tray of tea be sent up. He didn't want a full breakfast."

"What did his voice sound like?"

"Trembling, sort of agitated."

"Thanks," said King, "thanks a lot."

Richard King finished his shift at 14:00 hours. He handed over to DI Montgomerie, of chiselled features and downturned moustache. He advised Montgomerie of the nature and suspicions of the Cree case, advised him to expect Ian Cree to present at the uniform bar. At ten P.M. Malcolm Montgomerie handed over to DS Sussock, of old and haggard appearance, whose coat hung from his shoulders as battered and misshapen as a sack of potatoes. Montgomerie advised Sussock of the nature and suspicions of the Cree case and advised him to expect Ian Cree to present at the uniform bar, adding, "... ought to have been here by now."

PC Wanless observed the man approach the front door of P Division police station. He stumbled and staggered across the foyer. He was a small, slightly built man, his hair was matted, his spectacles hung by one ear, his jacket was scuffed where he had apparently fallen against a wall, dried vomit caked his trouser bottoms and covered his shoes. His breath burned with whisky.

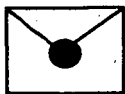
"Can I help you, sir?" asked Wanless, already having a bad feeling about this one.

"My name's Cree," slurred the man. "Ian Cree. I want to make a statement."

It was Friday, 01:35 hours. ●

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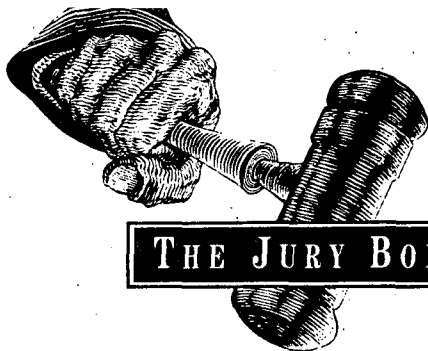


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by Jon L. Breen

When you think of sleuthing teams, Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson probably come first to mind, followed by all the other great detective/faithful chronicler combinations in their tradition, the greatest of them Rex Stout's Nero Wolfe and Archie Goodwin. Then there are the husband-and-wife teams, beginning with Dashiell Hammett's one-book wonders Nick and Nora Charles through sophisticated pairs like Frances and Richard Lockridge's Mr. and Mrs. North and more recently historical couplings like Anne Perry's Charlotte and Thomas Pitt. Which of the other detecting combos currently practicing belong in the all-time top echelon? I'll nominate two.

**** Colin Dexter: *Death is Now My Neighbor*, Crown, price unknown (published March 1997). Oxford's Chief Inspector Morse and his loyally long-suf-

fering partner Sergeant Lewis return in their twelfth novel-length case, in which a pair of local murders on a single quiet street may be connected to the contest for Master of Lonsdale College, from which Sir Clixby Bream is stepping down and for which two professors (and their wives) have ambitions. (The parallel to C.P. Snow's wonderful novel *The Masters* is duly noted.) This is among the best books in the series, with puzzle-building in the Golden Age tradition—if you mourn the lack of a contemporary Ellery Queen, you should find chapter twenty-three especially satisfactory—as well as a study in friendship. Oh yes, this is also the book in which we learn what Morse's first initial (E) stands for, and even that revelation is prepared for by a group of clues that might lead some especially keen readers to the answer before Dexter chooses to

give it on the final page. (My wife got it; I didn't.)

*** Tony Hillerman: *The Fallen Man*, HarperCollins, \$24. Navajo policemen Joe Leaphorn and Jim Chee each first appeared solo in his own three-book series, then joined forces for another half dozen, so far. Leaphorn is now retired and Chee in his mentor's old spot as acting lieutenant, when the bones of a lone climber found on Ship Rock prove to be those of a missing person of eleven years before. Chee's troubled romance with Janet Pete and Leaphorn's adjustment to retirement will be enough to keep series regulars reading, but the central puzzle and a cattle-rustling sub-plot are of above average interest, making this novel an advance over its immediate predecessor, *Sacred Clowns* (1993), and best in the series since the probable classic *A Thief of Time* (1988).

**** Donald Honig: *The Sword of General Englund*, Scribner, \$20. This one came out early in 1996, but it's worth tracking down, especially if you loved John Ford's cavalry movie trilogy of the 1940s (*Fort Apache*, *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon*, and *Rio Grande*). In 1876, the commanding general of a remote Army post in the Dakota Territory has been murdered, apparently by one of his officer corps, and Captain Thomas Maynard

is sent from Washington, D.C., under authority of President Grant, to find the killer. The versatile Honig, a renowned baseball scholar and long-time novelist and short-story writer in the crime fiction field, may have achieved the capstone of his career in this tale. The style, the characters, and the sense of place are all first rate, and the fair-play puzzle has as its centerpiece a clue that the author broadly showcases and challenges you to interpret. (No, I didn't get it.)

*** Maan Meyers: *The House of Mulberry Street*, Bantam, \$21.95. The multigenerational saga of New York's Tonneman family, here represented by young police detective John, is more enthralling than ever in its fifth installment, set in 1895 and including such real-life characters as Lillian Russell, Marie Dressler, Diamond Jim Brady, and (thinly disguised) Police Commissioner Theodore Roosevelt. The plot, involving labor unrest and civic corruption, and the romantic options of young Polish-Jewish immigrant photographer Esther Breslau will hold your interest, but it's the wealth of period detail that makes this series special.

*** William G. Tapply: *Close to the Bone*, St. Martin's, \$20.95. Boston lawyer Brady Coyne,

who'd rather be fishing, takes on a case that asks the trendy question, how can criminal defense attorneys whose jobs typically involve trying to get guilty clients acquitted live with themselves? The attorney in question is not Brady, who only takes clients he likes and respects, but old friend Paul Cizek, who disappears and is presumed lost at sea after successfully defending a drunk driver. Coyne doesn't have the scintillating narrative style of another Bostonian sleuth who likes to cook and is in a heavy-maintenance longterm relationship, but he certainly faces more challenging mysteries.

*** Thomas Gately Briody: *Rogue's Justice*, St. Martin's, \$22.95. In the second entry of a new series to watch, Michael Carolina returns from a Polynesian sailing adventure to Providence, Rhode Island, and TV news reporting when girlfriend Lilly Simmons is the victim of murder by snowplow. Much of the enjoyment of this entertaining whodunit comes from the supporting characters, including an incredibly corrupt and sadis-

tic Providence mayor and a faux-religious radio talk show host who has returned to town after failing to unseat Howard Stern and Don Imus in the New York morning man wars. (You'll enjoy the stunt that got him kicked off the Gotham air.)

If you grew up on *Mad* magazine and you can't stop laughing at *Airplane* and *Naked Gun* movies, you'll enjoy the humor of *Ron Goulart's Weekly*, a small-format quarterly (yes, that's part of the joke) from one of the mystery and science fiction field's most prolific and durable humorist/parodists. The eight-page issue examined (Summer 1996) includes such mystery-related features as an installment of the vintage Plato Nance serial *The Prunes Murder Case* and a review of *The Vermont Nutmeg Grater Massacre*, latest case for feline sleuth Pussywussy Muffinpaws. Subscriptions are \$10 for five issues from Goulart Publishing Empire, Suite 531, 578 Post Road East, Westport, CT 06880. (Make checks payable to Ron Goulart.)



THE ESCAPE

by Kandis Elliot

A

fter Crystal Weems realized that she had in her grasp the means for a Perfect Escape, she didn't bother overmuch with details for a Perfect Crime, unless one defined the latter as being a crime for which one simply escaped prosecution, rather than detection. The more she considered the act itself, the more she had to concede she probably would be found out eventually; and likely suspected from the start. But then, in order for her escape to be fully savored, she would necessarily have to convince everyone of her guilt. Ergo, it would not be the perfect crime, just an everyday murder. But it sure as hell would be the perfect escape.

It's not that Crystal seriously wanted to murder anyone. In fact, once the escape presented itself, she deliberated at length over her choice of victim. She could, upon reminiscing, come up with reasons to kill, say, a fifth-grade teacher who'd had a propensity for humiliating farm girl Crystal in front of the class; or the head

librarian of the town's two-bit library, to whom Crystal had given her summer vacation hours amid clouds of dust and under tyrannical enforcement of the Dewey Decimal System. Probably the most deserving was her older brother, whom her parents had always liked better than her because he was the boy. But with teacher and librarian retired and the brother long gone from the state, Crystal decided that the best choice was to kill her ageing parents, with whom she lived.

As for a motive, Crystal admitted there wasn't much. Her life wasn't all that bad. Nonetheless, before the sheriff, a cunning man whom she'd known since childhood, came a-knocking at the door—he would be factored into all this as well—she'd have planned her double murder to include adequate financing for a new life, preferably in a distant tropical land where she had no intention of having to work. Crystal Weems didn't like work. And no matter how often she'd been accused of having ice water in her veins, she didn't want to endure another Wisconsin winter, either.

Ironically, the gateway to her hot paradise was a cold cave.

The Crawfish was a slow, winding, muddy meanderer through cornfields and cow pastures for most of its length. However, in secluded, rocky sections of Dodge County, the river transformed into a mini-wonderland of dells, steep-sided rocky cliffs, and swift water channeled over weedless limestone. It was not a magnificent metamorphosis, the cliff walls but twenty feet at their highest, the water barely relieved of its silt load before the flume was run, the whole rock-cut not a mile long from entrance to exit. But neither was the area inconsequential, featuring pink lady's-slippers and shooting stars carpeting the stony, open woodlot above, clifftop bur oaks shading the water below, and lovely isolation. Nearly a half

When *EQMM* discovered that Kandis Elliot makes her living as a science illustrator for the University of Wisconsin, we decided to ask her to illustrate her own short story. Ms. Elliot is a Wisconsin native who owns a woodland retreat on the banks of the Crawfish, the river described in "The Escape." With her firsthand knowledge of the area, she was a sure bet for an accurate depiction of the story's terrain. †

mile from town on one side and from the Weems farmstead on the other, the river retreat was highly regarded by children released like wild animals each summer.

On more than one occasion during childhood Crystal succumbed to an impulse to test the reputation of the current, using an unaware cousin who'd neglected to watch out for her as she snuck toward the high-dive cliff above a deep pool. She'd wait to catch the victim standing just a little too far downstream, so that he landed on the fringes of the pool where fingers of current could snatch him away, assuming he hadn't broken his neck on the rocks. (No cousins ever drowned or got injured—save for dignity—mainly because they were all good swimmers, and lucky.) When the pushees found their way back to shore and up the high-dive cliff to bluster at Crystal, she would laugh and fling herself off at an even more dangerous spot to showcase their cowardice. Although she was just a girl, in pre-puberty one's actions spoke louder than gender, and Crystal was certainly regarded as the man of the bunch, as cold and hard as her name, a leader to be feared, or at least on whom not to turn one's back.

Consulting a map one night after a close call involving a cousin and the river's channel current, Crystal followed the course of Crawfish waters to the Rock River, thence to the Illinois state line, eventually to the Mississippi and out into the Gulf of Mexico; to her eyes a rather glorious way to have your turtle-gnawed pieces end up on the beaches of exotic Veracruz. Perhaps a seed for the Perfect Escape had been planted even way back then.

She'd been eight or nine when she discovered the cave in the river cliffs. That summer had been the driest that even Crystal's parents could recall. During July, for most of its length the Crawfish River shrank to a creek-cut mud wallow. When Crystal and her brother and cousins and farm dog, fleeing summer chores and heat, hauled inner tubes and picnic baskets of Twinkies and Kool-Aid to the limestone cut, they found the main channel reduced to a jump-across stream. Not that it wasn't still fun and wet and hedonistic; new rocks had exposed themselves to exploration, the depth of stony pools could be fully ascertained, and swift channel currents no longer needed to be feared.

Just downstream of the high-dive pool they found the cave—or rather the upper arch of a still-underwater tunnel that seemed at first little more than a natural limestone culvert. Crystal and her brother and cousins explored the find at length, discovering that

the water level did not quite reach to the top of the tunnel's arched ceiling. The braver children—Crystal first among them—by digging their little fingers into the rough rock, could keep their noses above water and spider their way back, back, back into the darkness.

At the termination of the tunnel, the ceiling suddenly became a chimney, which in turn suddenly widened above the high-water line into a cavern lit just enough via some mysterious means to illuminate stalactites and stalagmites, beautiful organ pipes and fluted rock couches, and all the other fairyland formations of a wet-limestone Wisconsin cave sidestepped by the crushing weight of the glaciers.

Save for Crystal, no swimmer ever saw the cave again after the river rose to normal levels. Navigating just the tunnel, never mind the cavern, necessitated a deep dive followed by an underwater swim through a long, dark, and enclosed space. The cousins, city-swimming-pool conditioned, never dared. Nor did Crystal's brother, not due to a lack of heart but to the inexorable advance of biology which saw him, next summer, slave to new hormones and pursuits that abandoned campouts and swimming and kids' fun in favor of motorcycles and drinking and girls who were other guys' sisters. Crystal alone made the attempt, found that the underwater journey was not such a great distance in actuality as it had seemed, at first, in memory, and that eventually she could do it both ways on a single lungful, not needing to make the short ascent up the chimney for a breath of cold cave air.

The cavern also shrank to less intimidating proportions with repeated explorations. It had no outlet; it was hardly wider than the parlor of the farmhouse; and it was vented by three perforations in its weeping, long-toothed ceiling. Crystal found these stony fissures from above and recognized them as assumed entrances to dwellings for badgers or woodchucks. The blowholes were, of course, the source of the mysterious reflected light that had fortuitously illuminated the cavern when children's eyes first beheld it. They were inadequate to transmit much of summer's heat, and the always-shaded stone roof conducted scant more warmth for the comfort of a wet swimsuit-clad visitor. But it was Crystal's very special place, and she accepted this gift of fate greedily, selfishly, and unquestioningly. Dives with plastic bags provisioned the cavern: blankets, food and drink, flashlights and

radios that had pretty good reception, comic books—all the necessities of the solitary rural child.

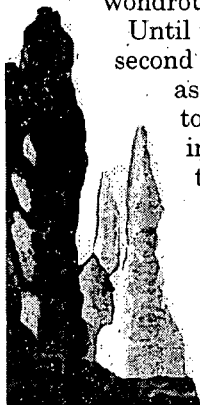
In an act of guileless prescience, she once lit a fire in the cavern to see if telltale smoke came up through the blowholes—it did. She stayed late one summer evening to see if a glow from candles or a flashlight could be seen from above—it could. The radio, even on its lowest setting, could be heard quite plainly, the sound amplified by the shape of the chamber. Crystal thence took pains to keep her retreat from eyes and ears on the cliffs above or the river below. Over the years, only a succession of faithful farm dogs ever shared her secret.

Her parents scolded her about her excursions alone to the river and about staying out too late and about all those other things parents cluck about, but in the era of Crystal's nonage, children, especially farm youngsters—expected to be resilient, tough, outdoor-loving, and wild—were not guarded so closely. Crystal, in fact, was never a focus of her parents' concern. She was a tomboy, a loner, self-reliant and self-entertaining. Her brother, the valuable child, received the lion's share of parental worry and retribution, foundering as he was more and more in the bad-boy business of stealing liquor, getting into fights behind beer bars, and, God forbid, impregnating immoral neighbor girls.

So Crystal had her river cavern to herself. Visits to it lessened and finally ceased with the passing of childhood and the yoking to adolescent burdens, summer jobs, and finally the great unrelenting weight of adulthood that never had time, interest, or, finally, desire to play at innocent adventures, no matter how daring and wondrous.

Until the year of her discontent, so to speak: the thirty-second of her life. After an annoying day at her town job as a bookkeeper, Crystal Weems was weeding tomato plants in the family garden and anticipating a long, soaking bubble-bath, when the singular thought struck her that the hidden cavern down by the old river rocks would make the ideal hide-away for someone—herself—who had committed a heinous crime and needed to literally vanish forever from the face of the earth.

It was so perfect. Even if her childhood swimming companions remembered the cave, none could possibly conceive of such a use for it. All



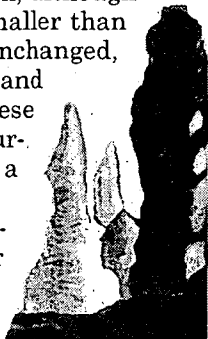
she had to do was stock the cave with provisions, commit the misdeed, then stage "falling into the roaring waters of the mighty Crawfish," which had indeed regularly claimed lives over the years—mostly of people accidentally falling in where the current was a little too swift and tricky. Their corpses were either grappled right away or, having been carried into the miring downstream impoundment, never. Except for one such mishap that occurred in November. Although the swift current never froze over, the slow-running impoundment into which that current carried its numbed victim had skinned with two inches of ice. Two inches held old farmers who tap-tapped their ice-fishing spuds gingerly before them, seeking a lucky spot and ensuing bucket of panfish; on that occasion someone tap-tapped out on the two inches of glasslike ice to see a body trapped beneath. But Crystal would not have to deal with ice for her perfect getaway, she had only to fall in, dive (ostensibly never to resurface), swim through the tunnel into peaceful seclusion, wait to be declared dead (on a Walkman's earphones—no telltale radio reverberating up through the blowholes), and then later swim out and begin a new life elsewhere.

The Perfect Escape.

There were details to work out. The crime. The sheriff. The afterlife, as it were. She had to see if the tunnel and cavern were as she remembered, and whether she could, indeed, make the swim, the dive, hold her breath, and so on.

She could. It was easier than she remembered, for the tomboy had kept up a healthy adult regime of biking and outdoor activities, including a good hard three-mile run every other day. Now, in the summer, at the prime of her life, she found she could go in and out of the tunnel still without a second breath, although the fit was a bit tight, and the cavern seemed smaller than she remembered. The rocky blowholes were unchanged, partially fern-draped, transporting fresh air and enough green-shadowed daylight to see by. These pores of her cavern still looked like woodchuck burrows, certainly nothing that could accommodate a hidden fugitive.

Provisioning, in the sole company of the current farm dog, was done in discreet stages. Over the course of the summer, Crystal, after explaining to her parents' single inquiry about her



excursions that she was taking an interest in the "natural area" in their back acreage, amassed at least a month's worth of life support in her secret cavern. Toward the end she had the ironic thought that for someone who loathed work, she'd just done a lot of it. *No rest*, she smirked to herself, *for the wicked*. Trip after trip brought small plastic-bag bundles of dried and canned foods, utensils, reading materials, powdered milk, instant coffee and other just-add-water beverages, propane tanks, matches, and a little Coleman campstove—the Crawfish was not a pristine spring-fed flowage; drinking and cooking water would have to be boiled—blankets, clothing, a wig and other disguises, new identification that would get her bus and plane tickets, a new birth certificate that would get her into Mexico (a professional bookkeeper had ways and means), toiletries, and toilet paper. That last business was the only odious part of it. There was a little alcove off to one side of the nearly hemispherical cavern that would do for sanitary use (as a kid she'd so used it on several occasions); but anything over a month's occupation would certainly imbue the cavern—not *that* well-vented—with an unpleasant, to say the least, air.

That was one reason she decided to do it late in the year. She also needed insurance against any possible remnant suspicion that she might have escaped drowning. She would have to take the plunge after the first snowfall. Not just a here-and-gone dusting; a snow lasting at least a day, so that trackers along the banks would find no footprints, see that there was no evidence of her having escaped her watery interment somewhere downstream. A declaration of her death would be heralded almost at once, and via a midnight exit swim and backroads to Madison, she could reenter the world within a week. Spending any more time in that cavern would be tantamount to jail.

The thought of cold water gave Crystal her only momentary pause. Water temperature would be a factor in her ability to dive, swim, make it through the tunnel—and back out. She did not worry about warming up once she made it into the cavern; she'd stocked plenty of dry clothes and blankets. Surely the depth of the earth would keep the grotto, like a cellar, comparatively warm even during the coldest stretch of winter, just as it had kept the stone cool on the hottest summer day. But icy water was lethal. Should the first snowfall come late in the season, in December, she would have to delay for an entire year. The river water would be too cold. But this was south-central Wisconsin, and the first

snowfall that could "track a cat" occasionally fell in October. (There had been years when it fell in July, but any freak early snowfall would not remain long enough on the ground.)

Crystal considered. In mid autumn, water temperature in the river would still be relatively warm, in the fifties at the coldest. She had taken vacations at the Milwaukee cousins' and the Up North cousins', where dips in Lakes Michigan and Superior (especially) meant baptism in waters of fifty-some degrees. Swimming had been impossible to endure for long, she remembered, turning little kids blue in minutes. But it had also been eminently survivable.

Crystal Weems awoke on the last day of October to see from her bedroom window a good two inches of slushy snow on the ground, and she knew the moment was at hand.

Her mother and father were at the breakfast table, as usual. Her spot was set, an orange juice poured for her. Ordinarily she would take her place with an exchange of casual good mornings, for it was just another work day. Her father would hand her a section of the paper and her mother would start her eggs and toast. They had never considered Crystal's staying at home a burden, or even unusual; it was a continuation of their life as they had always known it. There had been no suitors for Crystal, nor a desire for marriage, children, any home other than the farmhouse—until lately. As a bookkeeper she handled her father's finances, which had made it easy to liquidate the family savings and checking accounts into a plastic-wrapped semi-fortune, now awaiting her arrival at the cave. The cunning sheriff would also eventually learn that certain quite valuable gold and jewel heirlooms were no longer in their safety-deposit boxes.

The normal course of weekday-morning events would see Crystal off to her town job; Dad, semi-retired, would tend the few beef steers; Ma would begin household chores. Not this morning. Crystal did not come to the table but instead went to the den and got the old octagonal-barreled twelve-gauge off the rack, opened the gun-cabinet drawer and chose three deer slugs from their box, then walked down the hall to the kitchen.

She opened the shotgun and shoved one shell into its barrel, snapped it shut, and aimed the gun at her father, who sat with his back to her and had looked around from his paper at the click. He had no time to form an expression as she shot him, the thick lead slug inverting his face and hammering into his cerebrum. Crystal

cracked the old single-shot again, plucked out the smoking empty, inserted the second slug, and lifted the barrel toward her mother. Her mother had been standing at the stove, frying eggs. She had whirled at the thunderous boom of the first shot, and stood there without comprehension—or perhaps with comprehension that froze her on the moment—until Crystal's second shot caught her in the throat, tearing her carotid, exiting through her cervical vertebrae, and slamming into the wall over the eggs, which were sprayed with bright arterial blood even as the body dropped to the linoleum.

Crystal then popped that spent shell, inserted her third and last slug, and went to the back porch off the kitchen door. On the open deck of the porch, next to an ancient doghouse, the dog was barking with questioning terror. It was an old German shepherd/Airedale bitch, a farm mutt that kept coons and weasels out of the henhouse and had accompanied Crystal on her summer excursions to the river this season. The dog knew of shotguns, having hunted rabbits with the elder Weems when his aging hips could endure the autumn ritual. Crystal herself had gone hunting with him and her brother when she was a teenager and needed to prove herself as manly as them, and there'd always been a farm mutt trailing along to serve companionship and tradition. So this dog, like its predecessors, knew that a shotgun in a human's hands was not a bad thing and, in fact, meant a good time coming, but the gun had gone off in the house and there was the smell of blood and there was Crystal and the dog whined with fright and confusion.

She blew its head off on the porch.

Cattle bellowed loudly from the shed. They had not been fed or watered and they smelled death and disorder. Crystal stood in the snow between the house and the steer shed while the sheriff's people did cop things in the house. Their official vehicles waited near an ambulance. The sheriff had arrived first, looked inside, tried to get her to sit in his vehicle, let her refuse. Crystal seemed forgotten in the commotion, a slip that she would consider quite inconsiderate, except she knew the sheriff's attention had never wavered from her even as he directed his investigation. She'd no need to call someone to her in order to complete the business of the day.

She had earlier watched an officer come up from the roadside ditch where she'd thrown the shotgun. The man handled the gun carefully, showed it to the sheriff, then stowed it in a plastic bag

in a police car. Her fingerprints were on it. They would find her prints on the shotgun shells, too. She wanted proper credit.

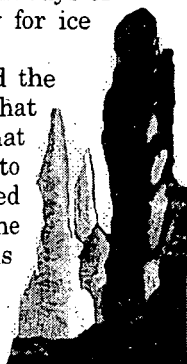
The sheriff came down the back porch steps and approached her as she hung her head, ostensibly in despair but in reality she was checking the condition of the snow cover, deteriorating from the warming morning. In early dawn her father had cleared the porch and walk of snow; sun had taken it from the asphalt drive and road. Her only tracks led across the grass-and-gravel farmyard to her feet.

"You holding up, Crissy?" The sheriff's voice held compassion, but his gaze belied a mind already sniffing her trail for deception.

"I'm holding up, Sam," she said. She did not put on a face or an act. Honesty sucked no excess mental energy, whereas pretense would soon cross over on itself with inconsistency, and get out of her control. Crystal as herself was unimpassioned and cold, an unlikable facade, as she well knew, but one that discouraged maudlin sympathy and could be interpreted as shock by folks who might otherwise wonder at her lack of, well, unhappiness. In actuality, Crystal was quite happy. Tropical paradise drew near.

She studied the sheriff of Dodge County as she listened to the beef steers bawl, a sound almost of pain. Crystal kept part of her mind focused on their distress, for shortly she would make use of it. Clear late-October sunshine brought a hint of summer to the day; even though temperatures had dipped below freezing every night this week. Crystal considered that the river water would be cold, but not so cold as to paralyze a swimmer who had to be submerged a few moments only. Water held heat; the river steamed all through November. Only quiet inlets, sloughs, and backwater areas would skin with ice these nights, and the still bays of the impoundment form the two inches necessary for ice fishermen and the cloaking of bodies.

The sheriff had crafty dark eyes that surveyed the farmyard, the porch, Crystal. He was fit, with that wide-shouldered, narrow-hipped conformation that would only grow leaner with years, never going to fat. Crystal knew he admired himself; he eschewed the standard patrolman's uniform except for the gunbelt and leather jacket, donning instead jeans that showed off his tight, lean legs and hips. Cowboy boots enhanced his already decent height. A local boy, he'd been a few years ahead of Crystal



in school, and in his younger days he'd been a bully and a conceited snot. Crystal's brother, homely, pimply, and pudgy, had gotten into three fights with him and lost miserably each time.

Conceit had metamorphosed into a self-assuredness and strength that turned the sheriff into something almost admirable; to Crystal almost lovable, or at least lust-able, as close as she could ever get to lust. But that was only momentary fancy to pass this interlude during which his mind turned from sympathy to suspicion, for her crime had flaws, even if her perfect escape did not.

"Crissy, I really hate to discuss this bad business right now. I just want to ask you to help me clear up some things. If you can't do this, I'll understand."

But she knew he knew she was quite up to anything. "Ask what you want. Don't know if I can add to what I already said."

"You sure you don't want to sit in my car? Got a thermos of coffee."

"I gotta be outside now, Sam. In the air."

He nodded a very slight nod. "A few more minutes, then." He looked over his shoulder, toward the open back door into the kitchen, through which they could glimpse the hall that led to the parlor and the den. "He got the shotgun and the slugs from the den."

"That's right."

"But he stole it during the night, because nobody noticed anyone around when you all got up and sat down to breakfast this morning."

"I was still upstairs."

"Getting dressed."

"That's right. Getting dressed."

He nodded again, verifying her replies against her earlier testimony. "And you heard the shots and came down and he was gone."

She stopped replying. He was talking to himself now, still going over events in his mind, and she was convinced that the events in his mind were becoming quite consistent with the events in her clear and untroubled memory. The sheriff was not only a smart man, he was a sly man well suited for his job, for he'd once toed a line dividing his life as it was today from a life led by those he tracked down. He'd stayed on his side of that line because he'd been smarter than criminals, and he was an excellent lawman because he could think exactly like criminals. Crystal, in her own mind, also nodded. It could not be the Perfect Escape against any

lesser hunter. When *he* gave her up for lost, her life would be free of pursuit thereafter.

She need wait only to see the realization in his eyes.

"So he got the gun at an earlier time," said the sheriff of Dodge County, "then came back at breakfast time. He killed the dog as she went for him on the porch. He killed your father as he sat at the table, and he killed your mother as she cooked by the stove." His eyes snapped to her, searching for reaction.

Crystal did not react. She knew he waited for grief, hysterics, disarray. Right now he would not let himself believe she was this cold.

"What don't seem to add up," he continued, "is the dog."

Crystal blinked. "What?"

"The dog. We been assuming he shot the dog when she went for him."

"Mitzy would've gone for a stranger."

The sheriff turned his dark, accusing gaze full on her. "Help me figger this, Crissy. He shot the dog. But where was the dog when he broke into the house during the night?"

"She was an old dog. She was half deaf and sleeps the night. Don't keep the coons out of the corn at all no more. If he came in the front door, she'd 'a never heard him."

"Unlocked doors. Rural Wisconsin old folks who got a yard dog and never keep the doors locked at night." He shook his head with consternation.

"They'll be locked at night now, Sam."

"If he came back this morning, your folks would've heard him. He may have spent the night in the house." When she did not reply, he went on, "But your father was shot in the face as he sat in his chair. Now that chair faces the back door right there. That seems to say the perp came in that door, where he had to shoot the dog first. But why didn't your folks react to that first shot? He was still in his chair, she was at the cookstove. Now why'd they just go about their business while a stranger shoots their dog on the porch not three steps away? And you said you didn't hear the dog barking before the shots."

Crystal shrugged. "Must be the killer was in the house all along."

"And he snuck through the hall as your folks went about what they were doing, and maybe made a little noise or something, so that your dad turned his head around and got a look at his killer

right then, before the end." He paused. "Don't it raise your hair, knowing your folks spent the night in a house harboring their murderer?"

She looked around, toward the sound of cattle bellowing through the conversation. "If only Dad lived," she said. "We'd know who it was, then."

The sheriff gave his head a little involuntary shake. Of disbelief, she knew. "But now we got old Mitzy," he said slowly. "If that's how it went, then she certainly heard the shotgun blasts inside." He gestured at the open kitchen door. "That door was shut or she would have run inside at the presence of the perpetrator. Or certainly at the first shot. So why did the perp deliberately open the door to shoot the dog on the porch? Nice clean shot between the eyes. Guy was faster than a very excited dog. But why'd he do that?"

"So he could get away."

"Back door was shut. Why not run out the front door?"

"Mitzy would have come around the house and attacked him."

"She didn't hear him come in the front door in the night. She wouldn't hear him go out the same way."

"He had to, to keep her quiet," she ventured.

"Shotgun blast is louder than a dog's bark."

Crystal was getting angry at being baited. "Sam, do I know? Maybe he hated dogs." Her voice rose. "Who knows what goes on in the mind of a cold-blooded killer?"

The sheriff eased back. "Not much of anything, I'd guess." After a moment's pause he added quietly, "I believe some folks are just born amoral. Can't never learn a sense of right and wrong."

And she had to concede the point, for even given his misspent youth he understood those underpinnings of human society, ethics and honor and morality, whereas she never could.

He leaned forward. "You see, if the guy shot the dog first, we would not have found your parents where they'd been, just sitting at the table or standing frying eggs. But if your parents were killed first, then why kill the dog? Unless the perp thought that it had to be done to make it look like a stranger broke in to murder two people."

Crystal heard what he did not say: *Because a live dog would have suggested that it knew the murderer, knew him very well not to have interfered with that deed, knew him—or her—like a member of the family.* A good guess. He'd never envision the dog



following her to the river to sniff and worry at certain "woodchuck holes" far too much.

She waited. Yet another series of loud bawls issued from the steer shed. "Let me give them cows some feed and water. Won't be a minute." As she spoke she stepped away, crossing the farmyard

toward the outbuilding housing ten Black Angus steers.

She hesitated at the shed door for a look back. The sheriff still stood in the snow of the yard, watching her. Even at that distance she could see his marvelous hunter's eyes come to the realization. He started for her. She broke into a dead-heat sprint down the cow lane and across the snow-washed fields, heading for the river's limestone cut.

She was a farm girl and athletic and had Reeboks on her feet. He had his bulky leather jacket and his sexy tight jeans and his plodding sexy cowboy boots. She kept ahead of him easily, maintaining the distance, for he had walked into her perfect plan and he had to see her fate for himself.

With ten strides between them she drew to a halt at the lip of the limestone cliff above the high-dive pool of her childhood. She turned to glance back and give him her one practiced look of guilt and dread and fear, none of which she felt, then threw herself off the precipice as he hesitated in rare surprise just beyond arm's reach away.

The plunge shocked her to the core, the water colder even than her memory of Lake Superior when it had felt like acid on the skin and turned her lips blue nearly at once. But she would not have to endure it long; even while airborne she'd been perfused with a sense of escape, of enduring freedom. She surfaced once from the dive, saw his face above the cliff, communicator pressed to his ear. It would have shocked her equally to have seen him jump in after her, and he did not. She thrashed briefly for his sake, kicked off a shoe for them to find somewhere, sometime, downstream, then dove beneath the black waters, never—in the sheriff's sight—to reappear.

The river was up from fall rains, the current swift. The cold was more powerful than she'd anticipated; even as she found the underwater tunnel she felt her limbs stiffening. Cold at a certain temperature sears like fire; her skin began to scream with hideous

pain. She'd taken a huge lungful of air but she'd had an 800-yard run across fields and through the woodlot, and halfway through the tunnel her diaphragm pleaded convulsively for an inhalation. She remembered swimming in through the tunnel to the cave and back out to the river again on a single breath. Impossible now; making the cave entrance would take the last of everything she had, strength, air, consciousness. But she could do that, and she knew it, and then she was at the back of the tunnel and her hands were numb in the freezing, still water, and then she was rising up the short chimney, and above was dim light.

And ice.

The tunnel had been flushed with river water that, unlike the deep waters of lakes, closely followed ambient air temperature. Only a current kept it open, in comparison with the still bays and inlets and slow-moving areas, which skinned over nightly in these first few days of oncoming Wisconsin winter, ice that thinned and melted under the still-warm sun of autumn—except in places where the sun never shines.

Ice born of cold-seep from the blowholes, a vertical river of heavy, below-freezing air sinking through the shallow cave that the earth could not keep warm enough, slithering from stalactites to dolomite floor, draining to the lowest point: the calm, wet mouth of the chimney, her gateway; her locked door.

Ice like glass, and through it she could see the cavern and light reflecting on beautiful stone formations, and she could glimpse part of her pile of supplies, the food, the books, her fortune, the clothing and propane stove and warmth and life and the perfect hideaway. Two inches of ice that would hold a man's weight, at which her unfeeling fists could not begin to pound, her feet without purchase to shove, the viscosity of the water like tar against her strengthlessness. Ice as cold and hard as her name, through which Crystal Weems saw a cavern that seemed abruptly not a sanctuary nor even a prison cell, but more like the frozen confines of hell. ●



SELF-INFLICTED WOUNDS

by Donald Olson

The trip to Florida, that flight from the specter of bankruptcy, had been a string of minor disasters which might have been worse if Heather had not had the foresight to squirrel away a bit of cash for emergencies. The Toyota camper's better days lay far behind it and only Wylie's misplaced optimism could have expected it to last the distance without breaking down.

Desperation had finally driven Heather to yield to her husband's demand that they appeal to her Aunt Vesta for financial assistance.

"You know she's rolling in it," he'd argued, "and it's not as if you're asking for charity. All you'll be doing is asking for an advance on your inheritance. Don't worry, I'll charm the old girl."

Wylie's charm and blond good looks had attracted Heather to him in the first place, but that charm had lost much of its potency over the past three years, weakened by too many lies, too much deceit and verbal abuse. The occasional infidelity she could tolerate, but that his gambling had driven them to the brink of penury had all but broken her resolve to preserve the marriage in hopes that Wylie would change, things would improve, life would get better.

The news in Vesta Cryde's recent letter that she planned to marry again after ten years of widowhood was another of Wylie's arguments for taking the trip.

"Once that happens," he'd warned Heather, "your inheritance may go up in smoke. I never did trust that flaky old broad."

Reached by a causeway from the mainland, Amarillo Key was one of those broad spits of sand dredged up from the Gulf to create space for more high-rise condominiums, the Starlight Tower being the tallest and grandest of these structures. Vesta Cryde's spacious apartment was on the top floor, and while Wylie was fetching up their bags she swept Heather out onto the terrace, which offered a breathtaking view from Clearwater on the north to the skyway on the south.

"Now let's have a look at you," she said, tilting her head back

and giving Heather a close scrutiny. "Hmmm. Peaky. Very peaky. And you've lost weight since I last saw you."

"I'm fine, Aunt Vesta, really I am." When Heather smiled, her quite ordinary features and big brown eyes acquired a glow of prettiness. "You're looking very fit."

"Never mind me. Tell me quick, before he comes back, is he still mistreating you?"

The glow faded. Heather tried to look indignant. "I never said he was mistreating me."

"Oh, pardon me, that's clearly the impression I got from your letter."

"I was just feeling sorry for myself. We were going through one of those bad patches. Every marriage has bad patches."

"So do lawns. You dig them out and plant new sod."

Vesta was in her sixties but successfully disguised the fact, if the sun was not too bright, with a wardrobe of girlish wigs and makeup too liberally applied.

"Now be nice, Aunt Vesta. Wylie's really making an effort to cope with his problems."

"How do you spell that? C-o-p o-u-t? I never did like that boy. Too pretty by far, and I know a roving eye when I see one."

Heather had forgotten how blunt Vesta could be. "Speaking of roving eyes, who's this Leander Bakewell? You never mentioned him before."

"I didn't know him before. He's a very nice man. Widower. Childless. He was in the garment business up north. Aggie Hess introduced us at a pool party. He's big as a bear and drives a Lincoln Town Car. What more can I tell you?"

"I can't wait to meet him."

"You'll have to. He's gone up north for a month."

Wylie joined them on the terrace, leaned on the parapet, and sucked the warm Gulf air into his deep chest. "Sheer heaven, eh, sweetheart?"

"Enjoy it," snapped Vesta. "Probably as near heaven as you'll ever get." And then, giving him a sharp nudge: "Don't cry, sonny boy. Only joking."

Wylie's lips struggled to form a smile. "I've done my part, Heather, now you can do the unpacking."

Later, Heather helped her aunt with the lunch: lentil soup, brown bread, and a fruit salad. Wylie was on his best behavior as they ate, not immediately crying the money blues as Heather feared he might. Wylie could be appallingly tactless.

Once the meal was finished Vesta said, "Time to feed my babies. The gulls, you know. Come along, Heather, they might as well get to know you."

While Vesta was in the kitchen Wylie whispered in Heather's ear: "I'll check out the pool, give you time for a heart-to-heart with Auntie. Don't screw up, sweetheart."

From a plastic bag Vesta tossed bits and pieces of what she said were fish scraps to the wheeling, screeching gulls.

"Filthy scavengers," she cried, "but aren't they splendid?"

Heather, who found the brazen, predatory antics of the gulls somewhat frightening, leaned over the parapet, looking far down at the blue rectangle of the pool, trying to pick out Wylie's pale, muscular figure.

"Careful there," Vesta warned. "It's a long fall."

"I won't fall."

"Oh, you fell, my girl. Falling in love with the wrong man can be a very long fall indeed. Often fatal."

Heather looked at the older woman and decided there was no point in pussyfooting around the problem. "Aunt Vesta," she said, "we didn't come down here for a vacation. A vacation's the last thing we can afford."

Vesta tossed a last few scraps to the gulls; seeming to know the feast was over they dipped and soared and then plunged downward toward the Gulf.

"I know quite well why you came, my dear. You came to ask for money."

The words carried no deliberate sting, yet Heather felt nonetheless a burning shame. "Was it so obvious?"

"Wylie was obvious. Turning on the charm full blast."

"It wasn't my idea, you must believe that."

"Let me guess. He promised everything would be peaches and cream if the trip paid off."

"Yes."

"And you believed it."

"I live on hope."

"Then you are a fool. Talk about self-inflicted wounds. Do you still love him?"

"Part of me does. Part of me hates him. I only know I can't leave him. Not while there's a ray of hope, or until . . ."

"Until what?"

"Until something happens. Something I can't be blamed for."

"Until he leaves you, is that what you mean?"

"I suppose so."

"Take my word for it," said Vesta, clearly irritated, "he never will. There are two kinds of bad husbands, those who destroy you and those who consume you. Wylie's a consumer. He'll feed on your sympathy and your forbearance and your determination to make things work at any cost until he's sucked you dry, consumed you emotionally, financially, and every other way. Now my dear departed husband Harry Cryde was the other kind. If he hadn't had the good sense to leave this global sphere when he did—and leave me well provided for, thank goodness—he would have destroyed me. No, my girl. Wylie will never change. Take your auntie's advice. Cut your losses and run."

Heather felt a sense of emptiness and defeat. "Is this your way of saying you won't help us?"

Vesta slid an arm around Heather and hugged her close. "I've had financial reverses myself. Besides, it would be like helping you drown yourself."

"He'll be furious. He's so utterly desperate."

Vesta looked down at the pool. "I wonder just how desperate."

Wylie was still fuming as they walked up the beach to the pavilion where he could buy cigarettes. "The bitch. The mean old bitch. I knew you'd screw up. I should have tackled her myself."

"She said she'd suffered financial reverses herself."

"What a crock! A slight decrease in some stock dividend, no doubt. Well, I hope you're happy. She marries this rag merchant or whatever the hell he is and you can kiss your inheritance goodbye."

"I'm sure she'll remember me in her will. I'm her only living relative."

Wylie sneered. "A bit too late to save our bacon." He brooded for a while and then, in a slyly malignant tone: "Unless . . ."

"Unless what?"

"Unless she had an accident. God, how easy it would be. Way up there at the top of the condo, leaning over to feed the goddam gulls. Whoops!"

Heather stopped in her tracks. "Don't even joke about it."

He tossed back his long tallow-colored hair, said lightly, "Who's joking?"

Heather had gotten too much sun in the afternoon and went to bed early with a headache. Wylie checked to see if she was asleep and then returned to the living room where he'd been morosely

watching television while Vesta worked on her needlepoint. For the past two days nothing more had been said about money; an atmosphere of strained politeness had prevailed. Until now, looking across at Wylie as she reached in her workbasket for a pair of shears, Vesta said quietly, "It's no use sulking, Wylie. There's nothing I can do about the situation."

It was the opening he'd been waiting for. "All we're asking for is a slight advance on Heather's inheritance. Not a fortune."

Vesta glanced toward the hallway. "Is her door shut?"

"Yes."

"I couldn't bear to tell Heather the truth. It's too shaming. The fact is, Wylie, there won't be an inheritance."

He shot her a guarded look of distrust. "You're cutting her off? Just because—"

"Don't be stupid. I love that girl. She's like a daughter to me. I've given this a lot of thought and I've decided to confide in you, to trust my instinct. It's Mr. Bakewell, you see. Leander. Oh, Wylie, I made the most terrible mistake in trusting that man. But I was lonely and he was . . . so kind. So attentive and amusing. They all are, I suppose, but you don't really believe you could be taken in until it happens."

Wylie was agog with curiosity. "Until what happens?"

"That beastly man conned me out of just about everything. Talked me into investing my capital in a certain high-yielding fund. Telling me how much more interest I'd earn. . . . And then one day I overheard him on the phone when he thought I was asleep. Certain things made me wonder. I made discreet inquiries. One night I confronted him with what I'd found out. He didn't even bother to deny it. Said there was nothing I could do about it. Wrong, I said. I'll go to the police."

"He only laughed. Said the police were already looking for him but he was too smart to be tracked down. Call them, he said. Call them right now. By the time they get themselves in gear I'll be long gone. He started to leave. Oh, Wylie, you must never breathe a word of this to Heather. It would kill her."

Wylie leaned forward, hands gripping his knees. "Trust me, Aunt Vesta."

"I think I must have lost my head, gone a little haywire. I picked up these very shears and followed him to the door. When he turned to look at me I stabbed him. Do you hear what I'm saying, Wylie? I killed him."

"Bloody hell!"

"Precisely. You can't imagine what a panic I was in when I came to my senses. Call the police? I simply couldn't. I couldn't face the thought of the consequences. I think my brain went numb. You've seen my big freezer in the utility room. I've kept it locked ever since that night. I shut it off and emptied it out and put his body in the freezer. It was easy, that part of it."

Wylie's throat felt suddenly dry; his words came out in a whisper. "Good God, you're not saying he's still there."

Vesta lowered her eyes, dropped the shears back into her workbasket. "Yes. Well . . . most of him."

"Most of him?"

Before answering she rose and tiptoed into the hallway, listened for a moment at the closed door, and then crept back.

"Well, all of him, actually, except for . . . bits and pieces. This is horrible even to talk about. I knew I had no way to get rid of the body. And then—I must have been madly desperate—I thought of the gulls. Those voracious gulls."

"God, you can't mean—you couldn't—you didn't—"

"No, I soon knew it would never work. So finally I just turned the freezer back on and—lived with what I'd done."

Listening to her words, looking into her eyes, Wylie believed her story, perhaps because one of the traits of a born liar is an instinct for detecting lies told by others; he felt certain she was telling the truth, at least in essence.

She returned his gaze now with a look of beseeching gravity. "Wylie, I need your help. I need you to get rid of—that thing in the freezer. You're young and strong and I doubt you're squeamish. I know Heather has those very strong sleeping pills. I'll give her enough tomorrow night to be sure she sleeps soundly. You can take that thing down and bury it in the sand dunes. It'll never be found . . . No, don't say anything yet. I've a little money left. Enough to move back north and buy a little place for myself. You can guess what this condo is worth. If you agree to do this thing for me I'll sign the condo over to you. Free and clear. Sell it and you can pay off your debts and then some . . . You realize of course you'd be making yourself an accessory or whatever it's called to murder."

At first Wylie had felt only revulsion, but now greed quickly overcame it. "I'm a gambler. I'm sure Heather's told you that."

"Heather, yes. There's the problem of Heather."

"Right. How do we explain it to Heather?"

"That'll be my job. You won't have to worry about it. You won't be around."

"I won't?"

"Heather thinks that with money all your problems will be solved. I'm not that naive. In a year, maybe less, you'll be broke again. Heather will still be miserable. That's the second part of our deal, Wylie. You must leave Heather. Remove yourself from her life. Forever."

A smile, devoid of its usual boyish charm, touched his lips. "So that's what this is all about. A bribe to get rid of me."

"To get rid of you, yes. And to get rid of Leander."

"My God, you are a right old bitch."

"When necessary."

"How do I know I can trust you?"

"You and I will go into town tomorrow. To my lawyer. You'll have it all in writing. Perfectly legal. Airtight. Will you do it?"

"Yes, I'll do it, damn you," he replied without hesitation.

Vesta studied his face. "You're willing to take that risk, and to desert Heather, walk right out on her. For this." She waved her hand to encompass the apartment.

Wylie chuckled. "It won't be the first deal I've ever made with the devil."

"So what are you so cheerful about this morning?" Heather asked him.

"Auntie and I had a good long talk after you went to bed last night. Cleared the air, you might say. She might be willing to help us."

Heather couldn't believe it. "She said that?"

"Not in so many words, but she wants me to drive her to her bank this morning. Just the two of us. I think she wants to surprise you."

Vesta herself said nothing to Heather at breakfast except that she had some business to do in town and Wylie had agreed to drive her. Wylie had skipped breakfast and gone down to the pool. "We talked very frankly last night. I think he still has a lot to get off his chest, so I think it's best we go alone. You don't mind, do you, dear?"

"Not at all, only . . . look, I know how persuasive Wylie can be when he sets his mind to it. You won't let him talk you into anything, will you?"

"My dear child, I'm much too cagey an old bird to be soft-soaped. What will you do while we're gone?"

Heather said she thought she'd take a walk to the end of the key and back along the other side.

"Just what I was going to suggest. Why don't you wait for us on the patio at the Casa del Sol. We can lunch there. You'll like it."

"Fine."

"Now be sure to use your sunscreen and wear that cute hat. The midday sun can be brutal. We should see you about one-thirty."

Wylie and Vesta were back at the condo by noon. Wylie was in a jubilant mood.

"I'll freshen up," said Vesta, "before we go to meet Heather. Be a dear, Wylie, and feed my babies. I'll fix you a drink."

After what Vesta had told him the night before, Wylie was not too happy about feeding the gulls. Not that he altogether believed that part of the story. At the moment, however, he was prepared to do anything to please the old witch.

Presently, stirring his drink with a swizzle stick, Vesta joined him on the terrace. "You said you liked vodka gimlets. So do I."

He raised his glass in a silent toast, then leaned against the parapet as he sipped his drink. He felt like some long-exiled monarch about to be restored to his kingdom and castle. The world might call him heartless, a real louse, but he knew Vesta was right. He was doing poor old Heather a favor. She'd be better off without him.

He drained his glass and set it on the rail of the parapet. He was not ordinarily afraid of heights but now, as he looked down, a slight wave of dizziness left him momentarily breathless. He looked at Vesta. Her features appeared to be dissolving into a featureless blur. He shook his head to clear it but the giddiness remained. He found himself gasping for air and his legs felt weak. He was aware of a movement but couldn't tell if Vesta's blurred figure was receding or advancing, and was only barely conscious of her arms reaching out as if to embrace him.

"I hopped on the first flight out after Vesta phoned," said Leander Bakewell, pouring the wine. He'd taken them to dinner at the Casa del Sol and now in his bumbling, garrulous, down-to-earth manner was doing all he could to comfort the two women and cushion the aftershock of what had happened. "I'm sorry I never had a chance to meet your young man."

"I feel so frightfully guilty," said Vesta. "All I wanted to do was surprise you both about the condo. Poor Wylie was absolutely stunned. Quite over the moon. He shouldn't have had more than the one drink. I heard the cry but thought it was only the gulls."

When I rushed out on the terrace and looked down . . . terrible, terrible."

Leander Bakewell patted her hand. "You mustn't feel guilty. Sudden good fortune can be as unsettling as unexpected tragedy. There was this chap in Brooklyn . . ."

As he chattered on, Heather's mind drifted away into what already seemed the distant past, to memories of what Wylie had been like when they were first married, before all the bright dreams had faded.

"I'll always wonder," she mused, "what might have happened if things had worked out differently."

"Perhaps it's best," said Vesta wisely, "that you'll never know."

Leander asked Heather if she would sell the condo after things were settled or remain at the Key.

"I don't know," she said. "I haven't had time to think."

"Leander doesn't like Florida," said Vesta. "That's why I decided to give you and Wylie a present of the condo."

Heather smiled fondly at Vesta. "You must have had more faith in Wylie than you pretended or you wouldn't have put the condo in his name only."

Vesta gave her a sidelong, faintly amused look of complacency. "Oh, I knew what I was doing, you can be sure of that."

"Bless you for an angel, Aunt Vesta."

Vesta had never felt less like an angel as she lay in bed that night waiting for sleep to drive away the ghostly images that haunted her brain, and would haunt it always. The girl would have a new life, she would find happiness, that's all that mattered. Vesta thought of what she'd confessed to Wylie the night before, a confession she'd never expected to make to another living soul. Of course the names had been changed—to protect the guilty—and certain details.

But what a foolishly credulous young man! Had he really believed she would murder someone without a thought of the consequences? She remembered that other death ten years earlier. She'd known then that the police would accept her story about the fatal wound having been self-inflicted.

Harry Cryde had been a brute, of course. Like Wylie, he'd deserved to die. ●



THE PROBLEM WITH THE PIGS

by George C. Chesbro

The first of the three shots fired in rapid succession grazed Charlotte's neck, the second ricocheted off the pavement, and the third hit Garth in the left thigh, just above the knee. As Charlotte squealed in surprise, pain, and anger, Garth clutched his wounded leg, staggered a few steps, then went down to his knees in the otherwise deserted parking lot at Nyack Beach State Park. He glanced up, squinting in the bright light of the early spring morning, and saw a tall, gaunt man in a ski mask and carrying a rifle leaning on the stone wall beside the narrow road leading down to the beach from Nyack's Broadway. As Garth watched, the masked gunman straightened up and walked unhurriedly down

the road, obviously intending to finish him off at point-blank range. The man was a lousy shot, Garth thought with a grim smile, and this seemed an odd and unprofessional way to carry out an assassination. Not that it made any difference; one assassin's bullet would do the job just as well as another. He certainly had plenty of enemies who wished him dead, but there weren't many amateurs in the lot, and he wondered which of these had finally tracked him to Cairn, taken note of his daily six-mile run to the beach and back, and selected this time and place to kill him.

There had been a time when he had never gone on the street unless he was armed, but those days were past, and now he rarely carried a gun, except on those rare occasions when he was working a particularly dangerous case. He was helpless now, crippled, and a stationary target in the middle of an empty parking lot. To his left was the Hudson River, its shoreline still clotted with ice. The trees on the side of Hook Mountain, which stretched toward the azure sky on his right, were barren of leaves and would provide no cover even if he could reach them. To his immediate right, perhaps fifty feet away, was the entrance to a two-story building that had once housed a factory for a company that had blasted trap rock from the sides of the mountain, crushed it in the facility, then shipped the scrapple by barge down the river to the stone-hungry boroughs of New York City. The building would surely provide sanctuary, but the wide, swinging doors at its entrance looked to be securely padlocked.

Garth thought it highly unlikely that the gunman was interested in Charlotte and Precious, but, fearing that the man might kill them anyway, out of spite, he removed the loops of their leashes from his right wrist, then slapped them on their haunches,

"He refuses to put fetters on his imagination," critic William DeAndrea said of George Chesbro. "That's why he can write novels in which a dwarf P.I. called Mongo can fight near-supernatural menaces and bring it off." The same quality allows the author to succeed with inventive stories such as the following about Mongo's brother Garth. For the latest Mongo novel see *Dream of a Falling Eagle* (S&S). †

trying to drive them toward the trail behind him that snaked along the shoreline. They refused to go. Squealing raucously, both pigs nudged at his arms and shoulders, as if to prod him to his feet. Bracing himself on Charlotte's back and grimacing against the pain that shot through his leg, Garth struggled to his feet, then lurched toward the entrance to the building. The gunman, who had just entered the parking lot from the road and was perhaps fifty yards away, raised his rifle and fired, but the slug bit into a stone corner of the building, which momentarily shielded Garth from the line of fire. He could hear the man's running footsteps on the pavement as he lunged at the guardians to the darkness inside where he would be safe. The swinging doors, which had no brace besides the heavy padlock, creaked and gave a bit, but with his wounded leg Garth could not generate sufficient speed and leverage to smash them open. In a few seconds the gunman would round the corner of the building and kill him.

Garth was preparing to lunge once again when suddenly there was a loud thump below him and the doors shook. He looked down and was astounded to see Charlotte, knocked back on her haunches and the top of her head bleeding from the force of the blow she had delivered, get to her feet. She wobbled a bit, but she backed up, then once again charged the door, this time with Precious running at her side. Garth timed his lunge with theirs, and the force of his own weight and three hundred pounds of pig did the trick. The old, dry wood around the padlock cracked and gave way, and Garth tumbled after the pigs into the darkness.

As Charlotte and Precious scampered away toward the opposite end of the building, Garth pulled himself back down a narrow space between two enormous pieces of rusting machinery that appeared to be portable conveyor belts. When he had been swallowed up by darkness, he leaned back against a steel tread, removed his belt, and cinched it around his leg to serve as a tourniquet. Through spaces in the undercarriage of the conveyor belt on his left he could see the bright rectangle of light that was the entrance. The gunman had not appeared in the doorway, and Garth did not expect him to; he would be a fool to stalk a man in darkness, or to hang around. The park was small, and there were houses less than a quarter of a mile away where the shots could have been heard. Hikers and motorists looking for a spectacular view and a break from their day used the park year-round, and both state police and Orangetown cops patrolled the area regu-

larly, as had been the case two weeks before when Sam Beeman had eased his cruiser up beside Garth, rolled down the window on the passenger's side, and called, "How are the girls?"

"Just fine," Garth called back. "If you've got a minute, I'll show you their latest accomplishment."

"Sure," the baby-faced Orangetown policeman said, pulling his car over to the side of the road and getting out. "I want to talk to you anyway."

Garth pulled two ears of barbecued corn from a plastic bag he carried in his waistpack. Charlotte and Precious pricked their ears and grunted expectantly. "Sit," he said, and the pigs sat. "Roll over," he commanded, and, somewhat laboriously, they managed to roll themselves over. Garth fed them the corn, turned to the policeman, and continued, "Pretty impressive, huh?"

"Damn," the young policeman said, taking off his cap and running a hand back through his thinning brown hair. "I see they like their corn *and* the cob. I didn't know pigs did tricks."

"Pigs are smarter than your average dog—just not as eager to please. You need a lot of corn, and you have to get them when they're hungry—not really a problem, since they're hungry most of the time."

"I thought it was your smart little brother who was so good with animals."

"He does the big critters—lions, tigers, bears, and elephants. I do pigs."

"And a wolf."

"Wolves don't do tricks—but they're amused when *you* do."

"I also thought Vietnamese potbellied pigs were supposed to be cute little pink things; Charlotte and Precious are two cute big gray things. What do they go, a couple of hundred pounds each?"

"Bite your tongue, Sam. They do start off as cute little pink things when they're young, but, like all pigs and people, they get bigger if you feed them. They both weigh in at about a hundred and fifty now. Charlotte was about fifty pounds overweight when Marge bought her a couple of years ago to keep Precious company. That's when I volunteered to take her out for a fitness trot two or three times a week. Precious insisted on coming along, and it's become kind of a habit. I get a kick out of them, and I enjoy their company. What did you want to talk to me about, Sam?"

The policeman sighed, shook his head. "We've got a problem with the pigs."

"Who's got a problem?"

"A guy by the name of Peter Erckmann—just moved to Cairn, bought the old Hurley mansion. He filed a zoning complaint against Marge. Claims the pigs make too much noise and keep him awake at night."

"That's absurd. They don't make any noise, and they're probably asleep every night before he is. They don't bother anyone. Marge got Precious as a piglet for the kids in her day-care center to raise as a pet. Charlotte came along later. The kids love the pigs, and the pigs love them. They're even housebroken. All they do is wander around in their pen all day, and then go to their place in the basement at night. The neighbors around here have never complained, and the Hurley mansion is a block and a half away."

Sam Beeman shrugged resignedly. "What can I tell you? Who knows what he's got against the girls? But there is a zoning ordinance in Cairn that prohibits the keeping of wild or farm animals, so he's on good legal ground."

"Mary and I keep a hybrid wolf that's a lot more dangerous than Charlotte and Precious. The village board gave us a variance. Why can't they do the same for Marge?"

"Maybe they will—but it's not certain. Your wolf was a special case. You didn't buy it to keep as a pet—you fished it out of the river. It had been mutilated, and you and that wolf were responsible for saving lives after those neo-Nazis set up shop in the county. People were grateful, and there was a lot of emotion. There was no place to send the wolf, so the board let you and Mary keep it. The variance you got may actually work against Marge; the board may not want to make another exception. Anyway, I just served Marge with notice of the complaint, so you're going to find she's upset when you get back with the girls. I figured you'd want to know."

Marge Proctor, the pigs' owner, was indeed upset, and when Garth arrived home he found that his wife, the folksinger Mary Tree, was too. Mary was in their soundproofed music room practicing a new ballad she had written with her band. Garth tapped on the glass and waved as he walked down the hallway outside, then stopped when Mary urgently signaled to him. She put down her guitar, said something to the three people in the room with her, then hurried out into the hallway. Her long, gray-streaked yellow hair gleamed in the sunlight pouring in through the skylight above their heads, and her blue eyes flashed with anger.

"Have you heard what that man is trying to do to Charlotte and Precious?"

Garth nodded. "I just left Marge."

"How can he do that?" Mary snapped, clenching her fists. "Marge's house is their home. Marge will never find anybody to take them both in, and no other place would be the same anyway. Those are friendly, intelligent, and loving animals, Garth, and they're so attached to each other! They have feelings, and they'll be so sad if they're separated and sent away!"

"I spend more time with Charlotte and Precious than you do, my love," Garth said quietly, gently caressing his wife's cheek. "You don't have to tell me that they have feelings."

"What are you going to do about it?"

Garth shrugged. "Marge and I were talking strategy, and we'll start with a little PR work. We'll organize a letter-writing campaign; it shouldn't be hard to get the parents of the children who have been in Marge's day-care center to speak up in support of Charlotte and Precious, and then the neighbors will testify that the pigs have never bothered anyone. We'll round up a lot of supporters to attend the next board meeting, and maybe we can persuade the trustees to give Marge the variance she needs."

"That's all?"

"All? What do you want me to do, Mary?"

"Your brother would think of more to do."

"He might think of it, but he wouldn't do it. And he wouldn't want me to do it. In fact, his greatest concern would be that I might overreact. You expect me to go thump on the guy?"

"I think you and your brother have thumped people for less."

Garth frowned slightly as he studied his wife. "Not over pigs and charges of a zoning violation. That's an odd thing to say to me, Mary."

"I'm sorry," the woman said softly, averting her gaze as she rested her hand on her husband's chest.

"Cairn is our home, Mary, which means Erckmann is our neighbor. I don't want it to appear as if I'm throwing my weight around, literally or figuratively. I very much value our privacy, and I prefer my famous wife to get all the publicity and attention. The people who'd be interested in me and my whereabouts aren't exactly fans."

"I know," Mary said in the same small voice. "You're always concerned about my safety."

"I didn't tell Marge this, but I'll tell you. If all else fails, we'll bring on the lawyers. If the board won't give her a variance, Frederickson and Frederickson will take on her and her pigs as clients, and I guarantee the matter will be tied up in the courts right up until the day when both Charlotte and Precious have died of happy, comfortable old age. I just don't want to pull that kind of stunt except as a last resort. Okay?"

Now Mary looked up at him, and Garth could see shadows moving in her eyes. "Garth, there's more to it. This Peter Erckmann is an evil man."

"Why? Because he doesn't like Vietnamese potbellied pigs?"

"Because he exploits people's fears, and he harms them. It's not just Charlotte and Precious who need your help. He has to be stopped."

"What's he doing, and how do you happen to know so much about him?"

"Marge filled me in when she called. Erckmann's a psychologist who now runs a practice consisting exclusively of group therapy sessions for people who think they've been abducted by aliens. He wrote a bestseller, which explains how he could afford to buy the Hurley mansion. He's started up a group here in Cairn, and Burty Bennett's his star abductee. Burty's parents must be paying for it."

Garth shrugged. "So Erckmann's one more alien-abduction con man, but his victims know exactly what they're paying for when they go to see him. I don't blame Burty for wanting to believe he was abducted by aliens; he'd rather do that than face up to the fact that he fried his brains on angel dust when he was a teenager and has spent the rest of his life wandering around the streets of Cairn clawing at his skin to try to dig out the worms he feels crawling under there. A whole lot of people are very unhappy with their lives, Mary, and they want somebody besides themselves to blame for it. Alien kidnappers make dandy scapegoats. What Erckmann is doing isn't illegal. I can do my best to protect Charlotte and Precious from him, but it's impossible to protect people from themselves."

Mary shook her head stubbornly. "A year and a half ago Bill Stiller lost his management job with IBM. He couldn't find another job with a salary even close to what he'd been making, and he started going to hell with himself—having affairs,

drinking heavily, putting on a lot of weight. He ended up in Erckmann's therapy group."

Garth's response was another shrug. "He sounds typical."

"What about Bill and Pat's daughter, Jenny? Would a seven-year-old fit the profile of a typical victim?"

Mary watched her husband's face darken, and she knew she had finally captured his attention and interest.

"Explain," Garth said softly.

"One day while Pat was working late, Bill took Jenny with him to one of his therapy sessions. Erckmann did a number on her, claimed that by talking to her he could tell that the whole family had been abducted and experimented on, and that Jenny and her mother were repressing the memories. Pat found out about it and went through the roof. She threw Bill out of the house and started writing letters to the editor and passing out fliers attacking Erckmann. But the damage to Jenny had already been done; she's been having nightmares about being abducted by aliens."

"And she's likely to have them for the rest of her life," Garth said in a voice just above a whisper. "The son of a bitch has implanted memories of events that never happened, and those phony memories could twist her life completely out of shape as she grows older. They could destroy her."

"Jenny used to be in Marge's day-care center, and Marge has been advising Pat. She's even written a few letters herself, and she has the academic credentials to back up what she says about Erckmann harming a child. Marge thinks that's the real reason Erckmann filed a complaint against the pigs—to punish her."

Garth abruptly turned and walked away, and Mary felt a twinge of fear. Garth would not use violence on behalf of the pigs, but he certainly would to protect a child. That was why she had told him the story, but now she was suddenly having serious reservations about what she had done. She felt manipulative and slightly guilty. She knew that her husband could be unpredictable and extremely dangerous in certain situations, when something or someone he cared deeply about was in jeopardy, and when he was in that frame of mind he took no prisoners. This was precisely such a situation. She knew from Garth's reaction that she had succeeded in arming him like a guided missile and pointing him at Peter Erckmann, but now she wondered what price might have to be paid. Her fear was not assuaged when she woke in the middle of the night to find Garth, in his robe, standing at the window and

staring out at the moon-washed Hudson River. "I'm sorry, sweetheart," she said, rising and going to him, resting her head between his shoulder blades as she wrapped her arms around his waist. "I was very upset this morning. I love you so much. Sometimes I think of you and your brother as the righters of all wrongs, and I know you can't be that. I shouldn't have laid all that business about Jenny on you. You can't undo what's already been done."

"Don't be sorry, Mary," Garth said in an even tone, taking his wife's hands in his and squeezing them. "I would have been angry with you if you hadn't told me and I'd found out about it later. The problem isn't one of putting Erckmann out of business, because there are dozens of people like him. A way has to be found to heal the girl."

"It's not helping anybody for you to be losing sleep over this, Garth."

"I'm not losing sleep; I'm thinking. You and Lothar have the same manager. His house has been dark all week, so he must be out on tour. Why don't you give your manager a call in the morning and find out where he is. Lothar owes Frederickson and Frederickson a big favor; even if he didn't, I think he'd want to help me out on this."

Mary frowned, looked at the back of her husband's head silhouetted in the moonlight. "I know where he is," she said, thoroughly puzzled. "He's in Atlantic City. He's got a month-long gig at Trump Palace. I'm supposed to be watering his plants."

Garth nodded. "I'll give him a call in a few hours, find out when he has a day off."

Mary shook her head. "How on earth is a master magician and illusionist going to help you in this situation?"

"I need an introduction to some aliens!" Garth replied, and two weeks later he reflected on the fact that the gunman, who had suddenly appeared at the entrance to the building where he lay in the darkness, was certainly no alien; at least not one from another planet, although he could very well be in the country illegally. On the other hand, he knew that if the man were ex-KGB or Stasi, or renegade CIA, he would have been killed with the first shot.

Garth loosened the tourniquet around his leg, but immediately tightened it again when he felt blood gush from the bullet wound; there was no sense in worrying about gangrene when there was a good chance he could bleed to death. The last time his past had caught up with him here had been when an old enemy who had

been with the Stasi in East Germany had unexpectedly landed in Cairn, but that meeting had been accidental. Very few people who were not his friends knew that he lived in Cairn and was married to Mary Tree, and their home number was unlisted. In Cairn, as in neighboring Nyack, local residents were fiercely protective of the host of celebrities in their midst. It was always possible that he had been tracked from the Frederickson and Frederickson offices in New York, but he did not think that was the case here. He was definitely dealing with an amateur, and even before the man, now half in shadow inside the building, took off his ski mask to reveal half a shaved skull painted with Mercurochrome Garth was beginning to strongly suspect that the source of this problem was much closer to home, possibly linked to the tall, stooped, and heavyset man with brooding, hawklike features, musty smell, and big feet who'd held up Garth's business card as he'd walked into Garth's home office and announced, "I've been doing a little checking on you, Frederickson. You and your smart little brother are pretty famous private detectives. You two have been involved with some pretty weird business."

And was about to be again, Garth thought, and said, "It's my smart little brother who's the famous one. Most of the time I just hold his coat. And you're involved in some pretty weird business yourself."

The hawk-faced man narrowed his eyes, which were the color of shale. "In the note you sent with your card you said you had something important to show me, and that I should come here at this time if I wanted to see it. But this is really about those pigs, isn't it? I was told you're friends with the woman who owns them, and I was warned to watch out for you. Well, you're wasting your time. I didn't spend almost three quarters of a million dollars for a house so that I could have pigs living in the next block."

"Why don't you sit down, Mr. Erckmann?" Garth said, motioning to the chair set up in front of his desk. "I really do have something to show you, and as a reputed expert on alien abduction I think you'll be very interested."

Erckmann hesitated, then pulled back the chair and sat on its edge, leaning forward as if ready to bolt at any moment. "What is it?"

"First, let's get things straight between us. You're a fraud. You take disturbed people looking to shift the blame for their problems, you hypnotize them to elicit these so-called repressed memo-

ries, and then you helpfully add on a few details so that it sounds like everyone is telling the same story."

"I didn't come here to be insulted, Frederickson!" Erckmann snapped, jumping to his feet.

"Sit down, Erckmann," Garth said easily. "If you walk out of here before you finish hearing what I have to say, there's a very good chance you'll disappear—permanently—from the face of the earth before dinnertime."

Erckmann scowled. "Are you threatening me?"

"You have nothing to fear from me, Mr. Erckmann. It's my clients you have to worry about."

Erckmann slowly eased his large frame back down onto the chair. "Your clients?"

"The reason I know you're a fraud is because I'm in touch with the only aliens within thirteen light-years of earth, and they've never abducted anyone, much less harmed them."

Erckmann threw back his head and laughed—a harsh, guttural sound. "You must take me for a complete idiot."

"You think I'd make a statement like that if I couldn't prove it?"

The other man stopped laughing, looked warily at Garth. "How can you prove it?"

"With a simple demonstration, which we'll get to momentarily. But first let me give you some background so you'll understand just what's involved and why I asked you to come here. A year and a half ago my brother and I were contacted by these aliens."

"Ridiculous! How did they contact you?"

"E-mail, at our New York office. They understand, read, and write English very well, but they can't speak it. They must have bladders for vocal cords, because when they speak it sounds like they're passing wind. They hired us to do a job for them."

Erckmann laughed again, but this time the sound seemed forced, and he looked uncertain. "Why should they hire you?"

Garth shrugged. "As you pointed out, my brother and I have been involved in some pretty strange cases, so I guess they didn't think we'd be fazed by having as clients a couple of barrel-sized things with fur and tentacles."

Erckmann licked his lips nervously, then swung sideways in his chair and crossed his arms over his chest, looking at Garth out of the corner of his eyes. "I want you to know I don't believe a word of this, but I'll humor you by listening to the rest of your story."

"Possibly the wisest decision you've made in your life."

"How do they pay you?"

"Gold, of course. They mint some very interesting coins."

"What did they hire you to do?"

"Find them suitable hosts, and then keep an eye on them, act as bodyguards, to make sure they weren't disturbed while they were carrying out their observations. You see, once they enter a host body, they can't leave it or communicate with us for a period of twenty-seven of our months. They can communicate telepathically with each other, but not with humans—it seems we're too limited intellectually. That means my brother and I have to use our best collective judgment to decide what may be a threat to them, and what's in their best interests. They understand what I'm doing now, and I'm sure they concur with my decision—we'll both find out shortly. They were particularly interested in studying human development in very young children. Now, this is where you come in, Erckmann. The problem with the pigs you want to evict and separate is that they're not just pigs. They're host bodies for our alien clients."

Erckmann snorted loudly and crossed his arms even tighter across his chest. "This is absolutely absurd, Frederickson. I knew this meeting was about those pigs. If you think I'm going to withdraw my complaint because of this wild cock-and-bull story, then you're a very stupid man."

"Actually, this is a pig tale, Erckmann, and I'm not surprised at your reaction. I'd feel the same way. That's why I've suggested to the ambassadors that they arrange for you a modest demonstration. Considering what's at stake, I assume they've taken my advice. We'll see."

Erckmann smiled and shook his head, but his smile quickly vanished as Garth rose, walked across the room, opened the door to the office, and ushered in Charlotte and Precious. Precious, always the more curious and friendlier of the two, immediately padded over to Erckmann and began sniffing his shoes. The color drained from Erckmann's face, and he hastily drew up his legs.

"Mr. Erckmann," Garth continued, "I'd like you to meet the ambassadors. I wish I could tell you their names, but, for the reason I explained, that's quite impossible. Don't worry about that one: She's always anxious to meet new humans, and she's probably taking field notes. But I wouldn't touch her. The other one is quite protective, and she's liable to take a nip out of you."

"I don't want to touch her!" Erckmann said in a strangled voice,

gazing down in horror as Precious, still sniffing away, proceeded to circle his chair. "I just want to get out of here!"

"Just another couple of minutes, Erckmann. We're almost finished." Garth went back to his desk, opened a drawer, and took two ears of barbecued corn out of a plastic bag inside. He threw one to Charlotte, who immediately began to gobble it down. Precious abandoned her investigation of Erckmann and scampered over to Garth for her corn, which he gave her. Then Garth glanced back at Erckmann, continued, "After all, the ambassadors are housed in pig bodies, so they have pig appetites. They do love their corn, and the cob."

"I'm leaving!" Erckmann yelped, leaping to his feet. He rushed to the door, opened it, then took a step backward when he found Jenny Stiller standing in the doorway.

"Mr. Erckmann!" the seven-year-old with the brown hair, blue eyes, and freckles said. "What are you doing here?"

"Uh, hello, Jenny," Erckmann mumbled as, obviously disturbed, he glanced quickly at Garth.

"You might want to stay just a little bit longer, Mr. Erckmann," Garth said in the same mild tone he had been using all along. "It's time for the demonstration. Come on in, Jenny."

The child skipped around Erckmann and across the room to Charlotte and Precious, put her arms around them. "Hi, Garth! You said I could come over and play with the pigs!"

Garth nodded. "Precious, yes. Charlotte's been a bit cranky, so I think she should stay here. You can take Precious outside. I've put Loner's muzzle on, so he's ready to receive company. Take Precious into his pen, and she and Loner can push the soccer ball around."

"Oh yes!" the girl cried, and giggled with delight as Garth snapped a leash onto the collar around Precious's neck and handed it to her. With Precious scampering along beside her, Jenny Stiller went out the side door to the path leading down to the beach behind Garth's home.

"Come on over here and see what happens, Erckmann," Garth said, rising and going to the window. "The view may give you a new perspective on things."

For a moment Garth feared that Erckmann would simply keep walking out of the office. Erckmann hesitated, then tentatively stepped over to the window. Garth waited until the girl and pig came into view and were about to enter the enclosure where Garth's hybrid wolf was kept, then turned to Charlotte. "All right,

Ambassador. If you agree with my recommendation for a demonstration, you can signal your ship now."

To Garth's considerable surprise and delight, Charlotte, as if on cue, grunted loudly. A moment later there was a wave of shimmering light outside the window, and Jenny, Precious, and the hybrid wolf winked out of sight.

Erckmann jumped back from the window, caroming off Garth, who had been standing right behind him. "It's a trick!" he shouted in a hoarse voice, putting a trembling hand to his mouth.

"I'll say," Garth replied drily. "I wish I knew how they did it. Jenny and the animals have been transported to the aliens' ship. Jenny's been there before, and she loves it. I think they've got some kind of huge playground up there; I don't know for sure, because I've never been invited aboard. You're more likely to see what the interior of the ship looks like than I am. I'm just a hired hand, but you're a threat to the ambassadors' mission."

"Only fools and nut cases believe in aliens!" Erckmann shouted, his eyes wide. Tiny droplets of sweat had appeared high on his forehead.

"That's an interesting comment coming from someone who makes a living treating people you've convinced have been abducted by aliens, and it's a real hoot that you've bought a home and set up shop in the one place on earth where they actually do exist. Ironical, don't you think? If I were you, I'd start thinking about what accommodation I was going to make to them."

Charlotte, who had been keeping a wary eye on things, grunted again.

"I don't believe it!"

"I wouldn't believe it either if I were you," Garth replied casually as he pretended to sort through some papers on his desk, "but that's irrelevant. I'm not the one who's threatening the well-being of the pigs housing the aliens' minds. I've done what I was hired to do, and that's all I care about. I'm not really concerned now with what you believe or do, but—just in case what I've told you is true—you might want to start getting your affairs in order. My suspicion is that you'll be abducted within a matter of hours. They won't harm you, but you will be living aboard that ship for the rest of your life. I'm sure you'll eventually get used to the sight of them."

Garth, his heart hammering, watched as Peter Erckmann walked to the door. He put his hand on the knob, but then hesitated. Finally he turned back to Garth, opened and closed his

mouth a few times, then said in a tight voice, "I'll withdraw my complaint against the pigs."

"Mmm. Smart move, Erckmann."

"Understand," Erckmann said quickly, "it's not because I believe you're representing any aliens, but just because I don't want to be bothered dealing with somebody who'd go to all this trouble just to protect a couple of pigs."

"It's always better to err on the side of caution; in this case, you have everything to gain and nothing to lose. You've definitely done the right thing. Now, just to be on the safe side, I suggest that you apologize."

"What?!"

"My clients' species is very big on courtesy and ritual," Garth said, reaching into his desk drawer and taking out an ear of corn, which he placed at the edge of the desk. "Tell the ambassador you're sorry, and give her that ear of corn. It will be a nice gesture." When Erckmann hesitated, Garth continued, "Go ahead and do it, Erckmann. You've already said you'd withdraw your complaint, so you might as well go whole hog, as it were. It's just to make absolutely certain that the ambassador understands you mean her and the other one no harm. It's for your own good, a kind of insurance policy. After all, you might not like alien food as much as the ambassadors like corn."

Red-faced, Erckmann crossed the room, took the ear of corn from the desk, and held it out to Charlotte, who snatched it from his fingers. "I'm sorry," he mumbled, jumping back.

Garth shook his head. "Don't mumble, Erckmann. Be clear. Say, 'I'm sorry, Ambassador.'"

Erckmann swallowed hard, said to Charlotte, "I'm sorry, Ambassador."

"Good," Garth said curtly. "One last thing. Lay off Jenny and her family—and that includes her father. Tell him he can't come to your group any longer. My clients have plans for the girl, and they don't need her father messing up her head with nonsense about other aliens that don't exist. Now you can go."

Erckmann virtually ran to the door and out of the office, slamming the door shut behind him. Garth reached under his desk and flipped the switch there, then slowly exhaled and shook his head in amazement not unlike that he would experience two weeks later when the gunman who was stalking him, half hidden in the

shadows, said "Garth, I got to kill you for what you did to me. You know you deserve it. Now c'mon out and let's get this over with."

"Burty? What the hell do you think you're doing? Why did you shoot me?"

"You were there on the spaceship with the aliens that took me and put the worms under my skin, Garth. I remember now. You're working with them."

Garth tightened the belt around his leg, cutting off the flow of blood that was pouring from his wound, filling his shoe. He was beginning to feel faint, but he willed himself to focus. He groped around him in the darkness until his fingers touched what felt like a crowbar or tire iron. "Burty, you horse's ass, I don't know what you're talking about, but I do know that I'm going to beat your brains out if you don't put that gun down. We have to talk."

The man with the permanent brain damage came further into the building, angling across the pool of sunlight and toward the sound of Garth's voice. "You were with the aliens when they experimented on me. Mr. Erckmann helped me remember. If I kill you, the worms will go away and I'll feel better."

Fighting the terrible weariness that was sapping his strength and making him want to do nothing more than lay his head down on the concrete and go to sleep, Garth, clutching the steel bar, inched forward in the darkness, toward the light. Waiting for Burty Bennett to tire of the hunt and go away was not an option; he would have to make a move soon, or he would die. "Burty, Erckmann's pulling your pud. He wants you to kill me because he thinks that will save him. I've got him on videotape saying that anyone who believes in aliens is a fool or a nut case, and then apologizing to a pig he thinks is an alien ambassador. That's not going to help him sell many more books. Your classmate Bill Stiller has seen the tape, and he's dropped out of the program. He's suing Erckmann, and he's subpoenaed me to appear in court with the tape. He thinks having you kill me is going to solve his problems."

For a moment it appeared that Bennett was coming to him, but the man stopped when he was a few feet away, looked to either side of him, then started toward the rear of the building, where the pigs could be heard rooting around in the darkness. Garth sighed, leaned back against the conveyor belt and smiled thinly as he recalled the look of wonder on Jenny Stiller's face when she had seen herself, a pig, and a wolf vanish in a wink of light, remembered the excitement in her voice as she had leaped off the

sofa in Garth and Mary's living room, clapped her hands, and said, "Mr. Lothar made us all disappear!"

"It's a trick!"

Garth let the tape run through the section with Erckmann offering his sincere apologies to Charlotte, then turned off the VCR and looked around at the others. Mary, sitting at the back of the room, smiled broadly, winked, and blew him a kiss. Bill and Pat Stiller sat side by side with their daughter on the sofa that faced the television set. The man was leaning forward and holding his head in his hands while his wife, her face registering both anger and relief gently stroked the back of his neck.

Jenny skipped over to Garth and put her hand in his. "That was so funny, Garth! Mr. Erckmann was talking to Charlotte just like she was a person, telling her he was sorry he tried to make her and Precious move away. Now everything's going to be all right!"

Garth nodded. "Yes. Now I think everything is going to be all right."

"What a wonderful trick!"

"Why don't you tell your mom and dad what happened."

"I took Precious outside, just like Garth told me to," the child said, turning to her parents. "Mr. Lothar was waiting for me just outside the door. He took Precious and me around to the side of the house where there were other men, a truck, and a lot of lights and mirrors. He played with Precious and me like he always does, and he showed me some more magic tricks. We had a lot of fun. I didn't know he made it look like we disappeared. That was really neat!"

"Mr. Erckmann was playing tricks too, Jenny," Garth said quietly, stroking the girl's hair. "He just forgot to tell you that he was playing tricks. His trick was to make you think that maybe you and your mom and dad had been taken away by people from another planet, and then he tried to make you remember it, even though it never happened. He tried to fool you, like Mr. Lothar does. But he's not as nice as Mr. Lothar. You and your parents weren't taken away by people from another planet, Jenny. Even if people from another planet do visit us one day, I think they'll be too smart to want to hurt a little girl. You don't have to be afraid of something that never happened, Jenny, and you can stop having nightmares. Your mom and dad would never let anyone harm you."

"I know that, Garth. I'm not afraid anymore."

Bill Stiller, still holding his head in his hands, choked back a sob, then said in a quavering voice, "I want a copy of that tape, Garth."

Garth put his hand on the girl's back, gently pushed her toward the door. "Loner's got his muzzle on, and I'll bet he'd love a good belly rub."

"Okay!" the girl said, and ran for the door.

Garth waited until Jenny was out of the house, then turned to the girl's father, said simply, "No."

Stiller sobbed again. "The man made a fool out of me, and he almost destroyed my family!"

"If that's how you see it, then you haven't learned a damn thing from this little episode. Erckmann didn't do anything to you or Jenny, Stiller. First you made a jackass out of yourself because you were filled with self-pity and looking for someone or something else to blame for your problems. Then you gave Erckmann a shot at your daughter. I didn't do what I did for the pigs, and I didn't do it so that you could see what an idiot you'd been; I did it so that Jenny could get her head straight. We all got very lucky. It was an incredibly long shot. The only reason Erckmann bit is because sometimes people like Erckmann who peddle nonsense get spooked when the same nonsense is peddled back to them. You're a big boy, Stiller, and I'm not about to help you try to destroy Erckmann. If you've got a beef with Erckmann for making a fool out of you, frightening Jenny, and almost costing you your marriage, you handle it yourself. I won't do anything to help you—not willingly. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"I understand," Pat Stiller said, looking up at him. "Garth, I can't tell you how grateful I am for what you've done."

Garth nodded to the woman and walked from the living room, and days later, as he lay on the cusp between darkness and sunlight listening to the footsteps of the man who was stalking him, he reflected on the fact that it was Erckmann who was getting payback, and that payback could be Garth's life. He knew he had to make a move now, for to wait much longer meant that he would bleed to death. Even if he could walk properly, it would be useless to stalk the other man in the darkness, for that would use up all the energy he had left. His only chance was to make it out of the building, closing the doors behind him, then attack Burty Bennett with the steel bar if he followed.

Garth cinched up the belt around his leg, struggled to his feet, then hobbled as fast as he could toward the entrance.

"Hold it, Garth!"

With more than ten feet to go, Garth knew he could not make it. Rather than be shot in the back, he stopped and turned to face the man emerging into the sunlight pouring in through the open doors. "Last chance to give some thought to what you're doing, Burty," Garth said, his own voice sounding distant and metallic in his ears. "You're not going to get rid of any aliens by killing me. You're just going to end up spending the rest of your life clawing at your worms in some cell."

"I gotta do it, Garth," Burty Bennett said, raising his rifle and aiming it at Garth's chest. "I gotta do it because of what you and the aliens did to me."

Suddenly there was a flash of gray as Charlotte, running at full speed, came racing out of the darkness, heading directly toward Burty Bennett. Bennett started to turn, but he was too late, and Charlotte collided with the back of his thighs. Bennett flipped backward in the air, landed headfirst on the concrete, and lay still.

Garth staggered over to the unconscious man as Precious emerged from the darkness and nuzzled up to her companion. When Garth saw that the other man was still breathing, he raised the iron bar over his head. He was going to pass out at any moment, and Bennett would shoot him if he regained consciousness before someone came by and looked in through the open doors.

Garth lowered the steel bar, kicked away the rifle. He would have killed Burty Bennett without hesitation if the other man were still on his feet with the rifle, but he could not bring himself to crush the skull of a helpless, unconscious man. He took the remaining ears of corn from his waistpack and dropped them on the floor next to the fallen man. Then he sank to his knees beside Bennett. "Sit," he said to Charlotte and Precious as he patted Bennett's chest and stomach, and the last thing he saw before losing consciousness was the pigs doing precisely that. ●

DETECTIVERSE

The Witness

by Beverly Hallin

A wise old owl lived in an oak;
The more he saw, the less he spoke.
The less he spoke of what he knew,
The more his blackmail bankroll grew.

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A SHOWER OF DAGGERS

by Edward D. Hoch

Susan Holt awoke with a start, wondering why her bed felt so hard. Then memory flooded back in a blinding instant of terror and she knew she was in a jail cell, accused of murder. She opened her eyes and saw a woman in the next holding cell staring at her through the bars. "You're awake," the woman said.

"What? Yes. Yes, I'm awake. What time is it, please?"

"Barely daylight. Quarter to seven."

Susan groaned. She'd slept less than three hours and her mouth felt as if it was full of cobwebs. She glanced at the lidless toilet in one corner of the cell. "Do they give you anything to eat here?"

"Pretty soon now. They'll bring something around seven o'clock. What you in for?"

"Murder, I guess. I haven't been charged yet." The other woman gave a low whistle of appreciation and Susan hastened to add, "I didn't do it."

"Have you called a lawyer?"

"Not exactly. I called someone who'll get me a lawyer." She had called Mike Brentnor, her coworker in promotions at Mayfield's, Manhattan's largest department store. He was hardly a friend, but in the middle of the night in a strange city she was feeling desperate. Considering that she'd awakened him from a sound sleep, he'd

In the course of his forty-three-year career as a published writer, Edward D. Hoch has launched more than two dozen separate mystery series. This month's story, which features an "impossible crime", stars one of Mr. Hoch's newer protagonists, Susan Holt, rather than veteran impossible-crime solver Dr. Sam Hawthorne. Holt was chosen, the author says, because the plot seemed to require a modern setting. †

been both concerned and reassuring, promising to be on the first morning plane out of LaGuardia, a flight that would take less than an hour.

Presently a guard brought her a breakfast tray with some juice, coffee, and a hard roll. "You'll be brought before the judge at ten o'clock," he said, not unkindly. "Have you seen your lawyer yet?"

"No. I think someone's on the way."

Mike Brentnor arrived a few minutes before nine, looking just a bit flustered. He was slim and slyly handsome, around thirty, the sort of man Susan used to see by the dozen in Manhattan singles bars. She met with him now in one of the interrogation rooms. "I phoned Marx from the airport and he gave me the name of a good criminal lawyer up here," he told her.

For an instant she was dismayed that he'd reported to their superior, but of course Saul Marx would have to know about it. She wouldn't be flying back as planned this afternoon. She'd be in a jail cell in upstate New York. "What did he say?"

"That it must be a mistake. Who is this person you're supposed to have killed?"

"Betty Quint. It's a long story. I'd rather just go over it once when the lawyer's here."

"I left word at his office. They were going to try catching him at home so he could come directly here. Mayfield's name carries some weight, I guess."

"I'm glad of that!" The coffee had revived her and she was feeling a little more human.

"I'm pleased you phoned me, Susan. I heard you broke up with Russell and I can't say I'm sorry about that. You know I've always had a fondness for you."

"Fondness? Is that what you call it?" She decided to make things clear from the beginning. A night in a jail cell had intensified the anger she sometimes felt toward Brentnor, though she knew none of what had happened was his fault. "I phoned you because I didn't want to wake Saul in the middle of the night, and yours was the only other Mayfield's home phone number I had with me. I do appreciate your flying up here, but let's not get the wrong idea."

"All right," he agreed, flushing at her harsh words. "Now tell me what—"

A guard came to announce that her lawyer had arrived. He bustled in looking like an upstate version of Mike Brentnor, though

with more style. She had a sudden vision of him in a courtroom defending her on the murder charge.

"Hello, Miss Holt," he said, holding out his hand. "I'm Irving Farber from the firm of Freeman and Farber. That's my father in the firm name, not me." A smile flashed across his face, then was gone. He was all business. "What happened here?"

"I've been arrested for murder is what happened," Susan said, her anger rising again.

"Have you made a statement to the police?"

"I told them what happened. They questioned me for hours until I demanded a lawyer."

"That's good." He took a yellow legal pad from his briefcase and started to make notes. "What about the assistant D.A.? Was he in to see you?"

She nodded. "After they photographed and fingerprinted me. I told him I wanted to phone a coworker to get me a lawyer. By that time all I wanted was some sleep."

"All right, Susan. May I call you Susan? Suppose you tell me your story from the beginning."

He glanced questioningly at Mike Brentnor and Susan said, "It's all right if he stays. I have nothing to hide."

"Let's start at the beginning. What brought you to our city?"

Susan took a deep breath, as if she was about to dive into a swimming pool. "I work for Mayfield's, the Manhattan department store. We're opening our first location in western New York at your new shopping mall in Pembroke and I flew up to work out the details of some special promotions. Betty Quint was my contact here."

More notes. "How long had you known Miss Quint?"

"I'd met her once at our New York office about six months ago. She stayed overnight at my apartment. We'd been in constant touch by phone, fax, and E-mail since then. This is my first trip up here because there was no point in coming until the store was almost ready to open."

"When does it open?"

"Next Tuesday. A week from today."

"Go on. Describe everything that happened."

I took the Monday afternoon flight up from LaGuardia (Susan continued), arriving at midafternoon. Betty met me at the airport and drove me to the new store. She was a friendly, uninhibited

young woman of about my age, around thirty. Seeing her again confirmed my impression of her from our initial meeting at the New York store. She was a good worker, perfect for this store, but perhaps lacking the cool sophistication needed for the Manhattan retail scene. She liked jokes and didn't mind attracting attention to herself. I wasn't surprised when she mentioned she was active in a local theater group.

We toured the completed Mayfield's store, where clerks were busy unpacking merchandise for the shelves and racks. Betty consulted her notebook frequently as she led the way through the store, pointing out special features of interest. A small cafe was already open for the employees and we took advantage of it for coffee and a snack.

"I'm so excited to be part of the Mayfield's team!" Betty gushed. "Have you been with them long?"

"About nine years. Ever since college."

"I thought Manhattan was very exciting when I was there in the spring."

"It is, but most of my excitement has come from traveling for the store. I've been to Tokyo, Iceland, Switzerland, London, and all over America."

"Do you meet lots of men on the job?"

"Not too many," I said. "I told you about Russell."

"Are you back living with him?"

"No." I felt like saying it was none of her business. Instead, I shifted the conversation back to the new store. "Do you have anyone helping you on promotions?"

"Sadie Shepherd, she's my secretary." Her face brightened. "There she is now! I'll introduce you." She called out to a slender dark-haired woman in her twenties who was already headed in our direction. "Sadie, this is Susan Holt, the promotions coordinator at Mayfield's flagship store in Manhattan."

The young woman had a pleasant smile and seemed eager to please. "So glad to meet you! Betty told me about the great time she had in New York."

"It was fun for me too. Perhaps you can come down and see our store sometime."

"I'd love that," Sadie said, then turned her attention briefly to Betty. "I wanted to catch you before you left. Here are a couple of phone messages."

"Thanks, Sadie." She glanced at them and slipped them into a

pocket of her notebook. When we were alone again she turned back to me. "It would be great if you could stay and help me through next Tuesday's opening."

"I'm afraid that's impossible, Betty. I have to fly back tomorrow afternoon. But we can go over lots of things while I'm here. If you're free we can have dinner tonight. My expense account is fairly generous."

"That would be great! We have a wonderful new French restaurant down by the harbor."

"I'll have to check in at my hotel first. I don't want to inconvenience you. I should rent a car."

"Why bother, for just one night? I'll drive you to the hotel and then we can go to my place while I change."

It wasn't quite as simple as it sounded. Just as we pulled up at my hotel Betty received a call on her cell phone. She seemed annoyed at the caller, someone named Roger, and tried to get rid of him. "Look, I'm working right now, Roger. Sadie gave me your messages, but I was too busy to get back to you. Can't we talk about this later?" She listened for a moment and then said, "I'm with someone from the New York office and we'll be going back to my apartment." When he said something else she uttered an obscenity and pushed the Off button on the phone.

I gave a grunt of approval. "Is Roger an old boyfriend?"

"Worse than that," she said, but explained no further.

It took me a few minutes to check in and she accompanied me to my room.

"I just want to slip into a dress and we can be on our way," I told her.

"It's not a fancy place."

"I've gotten a bit rumpled from traveling. I'll only be a minute."

She sat down on the bed. "Do you smoke?"

"Tried it. Gave it up."

She'd opened her purse to take out a cigarette but then thought better of it. Meanwhile, I'd unzipped my overnight bag and removed this simple print dress I'd brought with me for early fall wear. I didn't bother retreating to the bathroom for a modest change of clothes. We'd seen pretty much all of each other the night Betty stayed over at my Manhattan apartment. That was also the night she'd startled me by suggesting we stop for after-dinner drinks at the Plaza bar and then paying for them with a hundred-dollar bill.

"Can I use your phone?" she asked as I was freshening my makeup.

"Go ahead." I motioned toward the nightstand.

She got an outside line and punched in a local number. When the party answered she started right in. "Roger phoned me awhile ago." A pause and then, "Well, I don't like it."

I tried to keep busy with my makeup to avoid being too obvious about my eavesdropping. "I'm at the hotel now," she said, "but I'll be back to my apartment shortly. What'll I do if he comes up and wants the money?"

She listened intently after that, finally said, "All right," and hung up with a sigh.

"Is anything wrong?" I asked casually, finishing with my makeup.

"No, no. Just man trouble. You know how it is."

We started out for her apartment but she was openly nervous, keeping an eye on the rearview mirror as if fearful of being followed. I wondered about that but asked no further questions, even when she seemed to double back on her route and take the long way through a number of narrow residential streets. "Less traffic this way," she muttered, sensing my questioning gaze.

Presently we entered a neighborhood of large older homes, many of which had been split into apartments and needed ugly second- and third-floor fire escapes to comply with housing codes for multiple dwellings. Betty Quint parked in front of one of these. "Come on up. I want to take a quick shower and then we'll be on our way."

It was already after six and starting to get dark. Thick gray clouds had rolled in, threatening rain. She led the way to a side door which she quickly unlocked. I noticed there were two mailboxes, one with her name and the other with Mr. & Mrs. R. James Liction. "The landlord," she said by way of explanation. "A retired couple. They live downstairs. Come on up." She led the way to her second-floor apartment.

"It's so large!" I marveled.

"I have the entire second floor," she answered with pride. "These old houses are great bargains." She dropped her things on the coffee table and walked to the front window, gazing down at the street. "Damn!"

"What's the matter?"

"He's down there in a car. I think we were followed."

"Roger?"

"I'm going to shower," she said, walking into the bedroom as she shed her outer garments. I hesitated to follow but then she called to me. "Here's something you might like even if you did quit smoking."

I walked into the bedroom and found her holding out a cigarette with crimped ends. "What is it, pot?" I asked.

"Sure! It's good stuff. Helps you unwind after a day's work."

"No thanks. But go ahead if you want one."

She shrugged and tossed the joint on the bedside table. "I don't like to smoke alone."

Wearing only a bra and panties she went into the bathroom and turned on the shower, rummaging in a cabinet for a bath towel. "Come on in, Susan. Talk to me while I shower." She handed me the towel to hold.

I sat on the closed toilet seat, feeling uncomfortable as she shed her underwear and tossed it into a laundry hamper. Then she felt the spray of water with her hand and stepped into the shower, pulling the curtain closed behind her. "Tell me about the Manhattan store," she called out over the rush of water. "Is it true a homeless man lived there for days before he was discovered?"

"I've heard stories like that, but I—"

Betty Quint screamed, just once, chilling my spine. Then there was a thump as her body went down in the tub. "Betty!" I yanked open the shower curtain and stared at her body, drenched in the pounding spray of hot water.

She'd been stabbed once in the back with a slender dagger that still protruded from the bloody wound. A second, identical dagger lay in the tub near her foot. Otherwise the tub was empty.

I was alone in the steamy bathroom with her body.

Irving Farber scratched his nose and stared at Susan. "That story is impossible, you know. It couldn't have happened the way you told it."

"But it did!" she insisted. "I called 911 and the police were there within minutes."

"And they arrested you."

"Not right away. They questioned me for hours, trying to make me change my story. They accused me of all sorts of wild things, especially after they found the pot. I told them neither of us had smoked it but they kept pounding at it. One of the detectives suggested we'd been high on pot and made love to each other, and

then I killed her to hush it up. That's when I demanded a lawyer."

Farber's face was grim. "What was the detective's name?"

"Sergeant Razerwell."

He made a note of it. "Tell me, Susan, what's your explanation for Betty Quint's death?"

"I have none. I agree it's impossible."

"Did you touch anything in the apartment after you phoned the police?"

"No. I didn't even turn off the shower. I couldn't go back in there and see her again. I just sat in the bedroom and shivered until I had to open the door for the police."

Farber glanced at Mike Brentnor. "Will the store go bail for her?"

The question startled him. "I—I don't know. Depends on how much it is, I suppose." He wasn't about to admit he had no authority in the matter.

"Who's your boss?"

"Saul Marx."

Irving Farber glanced at his watch. "Is he in the office by now? It's nearly ten."

"He should be."

"Get on the phone and ask him about bail. Meanwhile, I'll talk to the assistant D.A. and find out how much they'll be wanting."

"Is there a chance I'll get out of here?" Susan asked, her hopes soaring at the thought of it.

"Depends on the D.A.'s office. Don't get your hopes up." He put the yellow pad in his attaché case and snapped it shut.

Susan glanced at her watch. "I'm supposed to be in court in ten minutes."

"They'll come for you when they're ready. Sometimes these things are a bit loose. If they don't get you there, it's their fault, not yours."

The attorney and Mike Brentnor departed, leaving Susan to wonder just where she stood. She'd investigated a few murders in the past, during her travels for Mayfield's, but she'd never been accused of committing one herself. The killing of Betty Quint while she was alone in the shower seemed so impossible that, paradoxically, Susan felt the solution must be a simple thing she could easily discover once she was free.

Presently one of the guards came for her. "Am I going before the judge?" she asked.

"Not yet. They want to question you some more."

Susan was immediately on guard. "My attorney—"

"He's been notified."

She was ushered into one of the interrogation rooms, where she sat down at the bare table to wait. Presently the door opened and a stocky red-haired man she'd never seen before entered. He was carrying a briefcase and Irving Farber was right behind him. "Good morning, Miss Holt," the redhead said, flashing a smile that was quickly gone. "I'm Adam Dullea, U.S. Secret Service." He flashed an ID that looked like miniature currency with its finely engraved borders.

Susan panicked, imagining some labyrinthian plot against the president. What had she gotten herself into? "What do you want?"

"I just have a few questions regarding your relationship with Betty Quint." He opened his briefcase and took out a clear plastic envelope with a hundred-dollar bill inside. "Have you ever seen one of these?"

"A hundred dollars? I guess I've seen a few."

"Did Betty Quint ever show you one?"

"No." Then she remembered something. "She came to New York for a meeting about six months ago. We went out for dinner and drinks later and I remember she paid for the drinks with a hundred-dollar bill. I was a bit startled, but some people like to use big bills when they travel."

"This one is counterfeit," he said.

Susan peered at it more closely. It looked fine to her. "What's its connection with Betty?"

"She passed it at a local restaurant. There've been a few other incidents too. We've had her under surveillance."

"Is it true you can do these on a good color copier?" she asked.

"Not of this quality. We think it was printed overseas."

"How—"

"I'm asking the questions, Miss Holt. Did Betty Quint ever show you or give you a hundred-dollar bill?"

"Just that one time when she paid for the drinks. And she gave it to the waiter, not to me."

"I understand from your statement to the police that she received a phone call from someone named Roger while driving you to your hotel."

"That's correct."

"Did she identify him further?"

"Not to me, no."

"And she made a call from your hotel room?"

"Yes. I'm sure you could trace that. Most hotels keep a record of phone charges for billing purposes."

Adam Dullea looked at her sadly. "The call was made to the local Mayfield's store, Miss Holt."

That surprised Susan and she must have shown it. "We'd just left there. Why would she—?"

He took a deep breath. "Look, Miss Holt, we're inclined to accept your story for the moment, and so are the local police. If you had killed her, you would certainly have come up with a better story than you did—a burglar on the fire escape or a prowler under the bed, for example. Also, your coworker Mike Brentnor has informed the police that you've been helpful with other murder cases in the past. You'll be released on your own recognizance, but you're to remain in the city for at least forty-eight hours pending another court appearance on Thursday, when charges may be dismissed. Is that agreeable?"

"I suppose it'll have to be." What were they doing, giving her two days to find the real killer?

The Secret Service agent departed and Farber smiled encouragement. "Come on, Susan. You're on your way out of here."

In the courtroom it went exactly as predicted. The preliminary hearing was adjourned until Thursday morning at ten and she was released on her own recognizance. Mike Brentnor was waiting in the back of the courtroom. "Let's go celebrate!"

"I've nothing to celebrate, Mike. A woman's been murdered and I'm the only one who could have killed her."

That was when Adam Dullea reappeared, his smile a bit more sincere this time. "Now that you're released from custody, I wonder if we could talk."

"About the murder?"

He nodded. "If you'll excuse us, Mr. Brentnor—"

Susan was happy to escape from Mike's eager clutches. She allowed herself to be guided out of the courthouse and into Dullea's car. "Where are we going?" she asked.

"Back to the scene of the crime. Isn't that how these things are done?"

She laughed. "I'm no psychic, you know. I don't pick up the killer's thoughts or visions. Sometimes I notice things that others have missed."

"That's what I'm hoping for."

This time as the car pulled up to the house a white-haired man came onto the front porch to greet them. He introduced himself as James Liction. "I own the place. You folks more police?"

Dullea showed his identification. "Secret Service. The victim was part of an ongoing investigation into counterfeit currency. Could I ask you if she paid her rent in cash?"

He shook his head. "Always a check, first of the month. My wife Mona was just saying what a nice tenant she was. Never any trouble. I can't believe she was involved with counterfeiters."

His wife, a stocky woman who moved slowly, came out to join them. "Tell 'em about that suspicious-looking guy across the street, James."

"Well, I already told Sergeant Razerwell."

"Tell me too," Dullea requested.

Liction shifted his gaze to Susan. "I happened to see the two of you drive in. After that a fellow parked across the street. He just sat there in his car for a long time. It was too dark to get a good look at him. When he heard the sirens coming he left quick."

Susan remembered that Betty Quint had glanced out the front window and become upset when she saw the car. "We're going to take another look upstairs," Dullea told him.

James Liction shrugged. "Go ahead." He and his wife went back inside.

The apartment was much the same as the day before, except that the door was sealed by yellow police crime-scene tape. Dullea pulled it away and used a key to enter. Inside Susan noticed signs that the drawers and closets had been searched by the police or Dullea's people. "What are you looking for?" she asked. "More counterfeit money?"

He nodded. "A great deal of it. Before she went to work for your store, Quint was employed on the reservations desk of a major airline. Her boyfriend, a copilot on international flights, brought back several small packages of counterfeit money, all hundreds like this one. They're often printed overseas and used as bulk pay-offs for drugs." He brought out the bill he'd shown her earlier, in its clear plastic envelope. He pointed to the lower right of the portrait where it read "Series 1996" in small print. "Notice anything wrong with it?"

She shook her head. "There's Ben Franklin, looking the same as ever."

"That's what's wrong. Beginning in 1996 the hundred-dollar

bills changed significantly. The portrait is larger and off-center. There's a new watermark and other safety features. Skillful as this job is, the counterfeiters made a fatal mistake in using the old design and dating it 1996. These bills couldn't be passed in bulk overseas, where a suitcase full of drug money would be carefully examined by the seller, so they were smuggled into this country to be passed individually."

"You think Susan's boyfriend hid them here?"

"Yes."

"And then killed her?"

Dullea shook his head. "His name was Lloyd Baker. He was found shot to death last week in the parking lot at Kennedy Airport."

Susan sat down on the couch. "You think the same person killed Betty?"

"No, as a matter of fact, Baker's killer is in custody. We were moving in on Betty Quint and obtaining a search warrant for this apartment. The easy answer is that she feared being caught with the counterfeit money and committed suicide."

"She stabbed herself in the back? And where did she get the knife? She didn't take it with her when she stepped into the shower. I was right there."

"All right, then. If it wasn't suicide, what happened?"

Susan recalled the scene vividly. "I don't know. It was almost as if a shower of daggers hit her, instead of water."

"Daggers? There was only one."

Susan had gotten up and gone into the bathroom. She opened the cabinet that held the towels, then turned her attention to the shower itself. It was made of molded plastic, recessed into the wall. The plastic was solid and there was no clear sight line to the room's only window, which had been closed in any event. The ceiling was smooth and unmarked, with the room's only lights arranged on the wall above the mirror. The showerhead was normal. It had not dispensed daggers. The shower curtain was ordinary white opaque vinyl. "There were two daggers," she called out to Dullea. "One in her back and another in the bottom of the tub."

Susan turned on the water and couldn't hear Dullea's reply. Something caught her eye. She reached down and peeled it away from the bottom of the tub. It was a piece of Scotch tape, several inches long. Stuck fast near the drain, it had been all but invisible. "Look at this," she called to him.

He came into the bathroom. "Tape. Where was it?"

"Stuck to the bottom of the bathtub. They could have overlooked it in their crime scene search."

"What does it tell us?"

"I don't know." She stared around the bathroom. "You mentioned a search warrant. When were you planning to use it?"

"Last evening."

Susan thought about it. "Someone named Roger phoned her in the car, before we arrived at my hotel."

"I read that in your statement."

"Maybe he was going to take the counterfeit money off her hands. With her boyfriend dead she'd need to do something."

"You don't just get a friend to deal in counterfeit."

"Maybe it's the same friend who was selling her pot. He might have been interested."

"Roger?"

"Roger," Susan agreed. "When she made the call from my hotel room she sounded a bit frightened of him. And she'd had other messages from him earlier. Maybe she was afraid he'd kill her for those counterfeit hundreds. Maybe he did kill her, but I'm damned if I know how."

Susan still didn't have a car of her own, and after Dullea left her off at the hotel she asked the room clerk where she could rent one. He directed her to a place just a few blocks away. As she was turning from the desk another thought struck her. "Do you keep a record of guests' outgoing phone calls, with the numbers called?"

"Yes, ma'am, we do."

"Could I see mine, please? I've mislaid a local number that I need."

He brought it up on the computer and jotted it down for her. "This is the only call from your room."

Susan glanced at it, a bit puzzled. "Yes, that's the one. Thank you." Dullea had told her that Betty Quint phoned Mayfield's from her room, but the number at Mayfield's new store ended in 6700. This number ended in 6743. Susan went up to her room and dialed it.

A woman's voice answered with, "Store promotions."

"Whose office is this?" she asked.

"I—it was Betty Quint's office."

"Sadie? Is this Sadie Shepherd?"

"Yes. Betty is—"

"I know. This is Susan Holt."

"Oh! Miss Holt!"

Susan made a snap decision. "I'd like to speak with you after work today. Could we have a drink together?"

"I don't know. I'm busy tonight."

"I have to rent a car. What time do you finish up?"

"Usually five, but until the opening I can pretty much leave any time. Since Miss Quint's death—"

"I'll pick you up at five, Sadie. If you don't want to go anywhere we can talk in the car."

She was outside the store in a new Chevy when the young woman emerged, exactly on the hour. Sadie heard her beep the horn and headed over to join her in the front seat. "It's good to see you again, Miss Holt. That was terrible news about poor Betty."

"How do you think I felt, being right on the scene?" Susan left the motor off since Sadie had indicated she had no time for a drink.

"How did it happen?" the young woman asked.

"I was hoping you could tell me."

Her face froze into a mask of ice. It could have been fright or defiance. "I don't know what you mean."

"How was Betty Quint killed in that shower, Sadie? You know, don't you?"

"Why do you say that?"

"Because I think you were responsible for her death."

Sadie Shepherd exploded into fury. "That's a damned lie! I know nothing about it!"

"Calm down and listen. This is what I know so far. Betty's boyfriend was killed after smuggling a large quantity of counterfeit hundred-dollar bills into this country from overseas. They had a flaw in them that made it necessary to pass them individually rather than in bulk, where they'd be closely examined. After her boyfriend's death, Betty tried to find a buyer for the money and she went to a man named Roger who was supplying her with pot and maybe other drugs. You two became friendly and she confided all of this to you. Somehow Roger frightened her, perhaps by demanding the counterfeit hundreds for less money than she wanted. He phoned her yesterday and made more threats. Back at my hotel, she phoned you at the store to tell you what was happening. She phoned her own direct number, but of course you answered. At the store yesterday you gave her some messages

you'd taken in her absence, so I knew you answered her phone. Just as you did when I called that number earlier."

"You think you know everything, don't you? We didn't become friendly only recently, as you say. We've been friends for two years, since we were in a local theater production together. She got me the job as her assistant at Mayfield's. I liked her. She was lots of fun, always joking and doing crazy things."

"What about her drug problem?"

"She smoked a little pot, sure, but nothing more than that."

"Roger was her supplier?"

She nodded. "I told her not to go to him about the money, but she had all these hundreds and she was afraid to pass them herself. She'd tried a few here and in New York, but it made her too nervous."

"Her boyfriend had hidden the counterfeit money with her?"

"Sure. He thought it was the safest place, but it didn't keep him from getting killed."

"Roger followed us back to her apartment last night. He was parked across the street."

Sadie turned away. "I told her what to do on the phone earlier."

"What was your advice?"

"I said if he was at the apartment she should manage to make her escape somehow. If he went after her, I'd go up there and take the money before he got it. She'd given me a duplicate key."

"She made her escape all right, by getting killed. Did you go there last night?"

"God, no! When I heard about her death on the news I knew there'd be cops all over the place."

"Where was the money hidden?" Susan asked.

"Inside a folded towel in the bathroom cabinet."

"If it was still there, the police certainly found it. They were all over that bathroom."

She touched the door handle. "Look, I've got to go. I've told you everything I know."

"Not quite everything. Where can I find Roger?"

"I don't know. He was just a name to me. Betty never told me anything about him."

She left the car quickly, walking across the paved lot to her own little white Neon. Susan sat where she was until Sadie Shepherd had pulled out and vanished down the highway. She wanted to make certain she wasn't being followed.



Back at her hotel she found the Secret Service waiting for her. Adam Dullea intercepted her on the way to the elevator. "You're a tough one to keep up with. I leave you alone for a few hours and you're off on your own."

"I thought I had to clear myself by Thursday morning. I can't do that sitting in a hotel room."

"Where did you go?"

"You mean you didn't have me followed?"

He laughed. "That was my job."

Susan just stood there in the lobby, wondering how much she could safely tell him. Finally she said, "All right, come on up and I'll tell you what I learned."

In the room she opened the minibar and offered him a drink which he declined. "Maybe a Coke, if you're having something." She joined him in one and he said, "Your friend Brentnor's been worried about you."

"I shouldn't be so hard on Mike. He did fly right up here and help rescue me from a jail cell. I just always have the feeling he's waiting for a chance to paw me."

"Has he tried it before?"

"Once or twice. But he backs off when he sees I don't like it."

He sipped his drink. "Where were you this afternoon?"

"Out at the store. I still work for a living."

"So do I. Who did you see there?"

"Betty's assistant, a young woman named Sadie Shepherd."

"Does she know anything about the killing?"

"Betty was an old friend. She told Sadie about the counterfeit money. She was afraid this Roger fellow wanted to take it without paying her price."

"That's about what we figured."

"The money was hidden in the bathroom cabinet with her towels."

"It was?" The news seemed to startle Dullea. "Sergeant Razerwell told me he personally searched the entire bathroom, including the toilet tank."

Susan looked up. A sudden thought struck her. "What's Razerwell's first name?"

"Eric. Don't let your imagination run wild."

She brooded about it for a moment, then remembered something else. "While I was in her bathroom earlier, you said something about the dagger that killed her and I told you there were two daggers."

He shook his head. "Only one."

"There was a second dagger at the bottom of the tub."

"No, just the weapon that killed her. It was still in her back."

She held her breath, eyes closed, and asked one more question. "Were you parked across the street at the time of the murder, watching the apartment?"

"Sure. I told you we were going to use the search warrant last night. I had to make sure she didn't remove the money before my men arrived. When the police came I drove away until I could find out what was going on."

Susan opened her eyes and smiled. "Then I know how it was done."

It was back to Betty Quint's apartment once more. Darkness had settled in and a strong breeze was blowing a few dead leaves down the center of the street. White-haired James Liction opened the door in answer to their ring and seemed more resigned than surprised at seeing them. "What is it? You want to examine the apartment again?"

"I don't think that'll be necessary right now," Susan told him. "I just want to ask you one question."

"Well, you might as well come in. You too, Mr. Dullea. Now what's the question?"

The answer came before she had a chance to ask it. From the kitchen, his wife called out, "Who is it, Roger?"

"It's just—" Liction began. Then he must have seen the expression on Susan's face and realized what had happened. He tried to twist away as Dullea reached out to grab him.

When the Secret Service man had him under control; Mrs. Liction came into the room. "Hey, what's going on?"

"We just have a few questions for your husband, that's all."

She seemed resigned to it. "About the drugs, I suppose."

"That and other things."

Then Susan spoke. "I was going to ask you what the 'R' stood for in R. James Liction, the name on your mailbox. I thought maybe it was Roger. That's what Betty Quint called you, wasn't it?"

"I guess so," he mumbled. "I might have sold her a little pot. Nothing wrong with that."

"Are you growing it in the basement?" Dullea asked. "Some people do."

"Can I call you Roger?" Susan asked, then went on. "Roger, we

know Betty offered to sell you a quantity of counterfeit hundred-dollar bills from overseas. She was frightened that you might try to steal them from her."

"I didn't kill her," Liction insisted. He could see where the conversation was leading. "I couldn't have killed her. You were alone with her when it happened."

"How did you know that?" Susan asked. "By looking in the bathroom window from your perch on the fire escape? Yes, I know there's a fire escape outside that window even though I didn't actually look at it. I saw the fire escape to the second floor when I drove up with Betty yesterday, and Mr. Dullea here even commented on the unlikely prospect of a burglar coming through the bathroom window from the fire escape."

Liction moistened his lips. "I think I want a lawyer."

"You'll get one," Adam Dullea said, formally stating his rights. "First thing, we're going to get Sergeant Razerwell down here to make the formal arrest. The murder is his job. I'm just interested in the money."

Mrs. Liction spoke from the doorway. "If we give you the money, will you forget about the killing?"

"Shut up, Mona!" he nearly screamed.

"You see," Susan continued, "I made a big mistake. Betty had seen someone in a car across the street and that frightened her. I thought it was Roger, but she knew it was Mr. Dullea here. She was caught between the two of them, with no way out. Maybe she'd even spotted you on the fire escape, Roger. Anyway, she decided to fake an attack on herself in the shower and escape by being taken to the hospital in an ambulance. She'd done some community theater work and had a fake dagger with one of those collapsible blades, the sort that ejects imitation blood when the blade retracts. It has adhesive to stick to the skin. While she was rummaging for a towel, she took the fake dagger and a real one and attached them to her body with Scotch tape, probably under her arm where I couldn't see it. Her secretary Sadie said she was a great joker. Maybe she'd even pulled this stunt before."

Dullea was shaking his head. "Are you saying she accidentally killed herself?"

"No, no! She meant to tell me she was wounded and to call an ambulance. Then she'd give herself a flesh wound with the real dagger before they arrived, and she'd be rushed to the hospital, escaping both Roger and the Secret Service. But after sticking the

collapsing dagger to her back, she let herself fall in the shower and accidentally hit her head, knocking her out for a moment. The real dagger, still taped to her body, came loose and fell in the tub. I saw the daggers and thought she was dead. Roger here had heard her scream, and while I was phoning 911 he came in the window of the bathroom to get the package of money. He must have seen her hide it there earlier. She was beginning to stir in the tub and he stabbed her with the real dagger. He saw that the first one was a fake, so he pulled it off her back and took it with him, along with the money. He went back out the window and closed it behind him."

"How long would that have taken?"

"Not more than thirty seconds, and any sounds would have been covered by the water from the shower, which I hadn't turned off. I stayed out of the bathroom completely after I called the police."

"What would she have told you and the doctors after the hoax was discovered?" Dullea asked.

Susan shrugged. "She'd have had a slight flesh wound to show the doctors, and she'd have thought up some story to explain the knife. She'd have told me it was meant to be a joke and it backfired. At least she'd be safe from both Roger and you. That was the important thing."

Dullea allowed a brief nod of agreement. "How did you know it was Liction? That first initial wasn't much evidence to go on."

"There was something else. When Betty called Sadie from my hotel room, she said she was going back to her apartment and what should she do if Roger came up and demanded the money. She was saying that Roger lived downstairs, if I'd only known how to interpret her words. And once I knew Roger was so close, the method of murder wasn't so hard to work out. One of the daggers had disappeared, and that meant someone had entered the bathroom before the police arrived. No one came through the door and the window was the only other entrance. If I hadn't killed Betty, the person who entered through the window must have done it. Roger was too likely to be ignored."

It was Mona Liction who returned with the package of counterfeit money while they waited for the police. "Here! Take it! I told him not to get involved in this. Take it and leave us alone."

Adam Dullea reached out a hand as a police car pulled up in front. "I'll take it, but I'm afraid we won't be leaving you alone for quite some time." ●



FLIGHTS OF ANGELS

by William Bankier

The telephone rang in the kitchen while Rex Gilman was on the back lawn, weeding. He heard Dandy's voice when she answered, loud with surprise and delight. "Timmy! This is wonderful. Are Walter and Bev with you? Forget about a hotel, you're staying here. Never mind the shuttle, Rex will come and get you."

Gilman experienced annoyance mixed with expectation.

Weary from the weeding, he had been looking forward to a bath, a nap, and a lazy dinner. Now it looked like he was driving to the airport. But Timmy Williamson was a good kid. How many years was it since the family had been transferred east to Harper's Landing? He would have changed. He would be able to tell lots of stories about Walter and Bev.

Dandy perched on the stool in the bay window as Gilman put on fresh clothes. "He sounded odd on the telephone. Sort of distant."

"Tired from the flight?"

"More than that. Timmy has something on his mind."

The fast traffic on Sepulveda made Gilman nervous. But it was a quick route between Sherman Oaks and the airport, so he drove it. He remembered the farewell party nine years ago when the Williamsons were leaving Los Angeles. Timmy was only ten, but he kept getting in people's hair till after midnight when he fell asleep on a sofa. Bev covered him with a coat.

Gilman was working at the studio in those days, costing productions. He liked to believe he was in the movie business, even though his job was only bookkeeping. He was still convinced his treatment for an adventure film had merit. The fact that a lot of people had read it and rejected it meant nothing. It happens to the best, it happens to the rest.

His heartbeat increased as he thought about the one-liner he had recently sold to Leno. They could not tell him when it would be used. But he had been paid, so he was certain Jay would deliver it some night in his monologue. Gilman was watching faithfully most nights at eleven-thirty. Those shows he could not see, he was tapping on the VCR.

It was an off-hour at LAX. Gilman had no problem spotting Timmy sitting on his luggage. There were three large bags; some visit! The beard was a surprise, and so was the boy's height when he stood up. He towered over Gilman as they shook hands.

"This is good of you, Uncle Rex."

"We're glad you're here. What's up?"

The young man ducked his head. "All kinds of trouble with Mom and Dad." Gilman opened the trunk and Timmy stowed his bags. "They don't like the idea of me moving out here."

Gilman let that sink in. "This isn't just a visit?" He slammed the lid.

"I've no interest in going to college." The boy climbed into the pas-

William Bankier is primarily a short story writer these days, but over the years he has worn many literary hats. He once wrote a play that was performed to enthusiastic reviews at Wimbledon, and during the 70's he authored a series of women's novels. One of Mr. Bankier's great skills is making the art of storytelling seem effortless—as he does so effectively here! †

senger seat and said, as Gilman got behind the wheel and switched on, "I intend to sign up for drama school. I'm going to be an actor."

Dandy Gilman gave their houseguest more potato salad. "You don't have to explain yourself to me, Timmy," she said. "I was named after my cousin, Wilson Dandridge. He had an outstanding career on stage, in Pasadena, in San Diego. He was just a bit too early for films."

Rex said, "Let's not forget the Leno show. I have a feeling he'll do my gag."

Timmy smiled for the first time in hours. Sad eyes brightened above the hillbilly beard. "Remember the stuff you taught me to say, Uncle Rex? It used to tick off my parents when I'd get started. 'When I was born,'" he recited, "I was just a child. My mother loved children, she always wished I was one. When I went to school, I was the teacher's pet. She couldn't afford a dog."

Gilman picked up the ancient monologue. "My family moved when I was five. But I found them anyway. My father said, 'Son, you're gonna go a long way.' Then he closed the door of the boxcar."

"Will you two stop?" Dandy moaned, laughing in spite of herself.

It was what Gilman loved about gag writing, about the whole mystique of comedy. You got people to laugh in spite of themselves.

"I knew you guys would understand," Timmy said. "Dad says get a college education. You can always do what you want later on. He's a bad example. Puts in all those years and then the company decides to close down and relocate in upstate New York. So we have to sell our house and move three thousand miles. There's nothing wrong with Harper's Landing. But I want to do what I want to do. Not what some company tells me."

"Hey," Gilman reminded the boy. "It's because your old man did what the company told him that you're able to fly back here and attend drama school."

Timmy got back under his cloud. "I never told them I was coming to L.A. I didn't want them calling up and turning you against me."

"If they call," Dandy said, "we'll stick up for you."

"They won't call."

Gilman's gag was not used on the next three *Tonight* shows. On the third evening, when Leno finished his monologue and went to commercial, Timmy said, "Tell us your joke, Uncle Rex."

"No way. I want you to hear it from the lips of the master."

The visitor was settled in. He had been accepted at a drama school on Santa Monica Boulevard, had paid his tuition, and would attend his first class next Thursday. He came back from the audition in high spirits: His mood was fluctuating between euphoria and suicidal gloom.

"I did Hamlet," he reported when he came home that day. "They were impressed. I showed them my review from the local paper. They had me do improvisation with a girl who was there. I even threw in some of your stand-up."

Dandy came in from the kitchen with a bowl of popcorn.

"There's a police car outside."

Moments later, heavy footsteps made the porch creak and then the door chime sounded. Gilman opened up and saw three uniformed officers. "Is there a Timmy Williamson here?"

"Yes. What's going on?"

"May we speak to him, sir?"

"Come in."

Timmy moved into the vestibule. Dandy switched off the television. A cop said, "Are you Timmy Williamson from Harper's Landing?"

"Yes." The boy frowned. "Is it my parents?"

"When did you last see them?"

"Three days ago. Has something happened?"

"We have a report there was an argument."

"They want me to attend college."

"Your neighbor says it got violent."

"Mrs. Lucas? She's a liar."

Gilman finally got hold of what was happening. "Timmy, maybe you'd better not say any more."

"You have the right to remain silent," the cop conceded. "Anything you say may be taken down and used against you in a court of law."

"Am I under arrest?"

"For the murder of Walter and Beverly Williamson. You'd better hire yourself a lawyer."

"You have to go," Dandy said in the dark. "The boy must be scared to death."

Gilman reared up and punched his pillow. He fell back down. It was a second night of interrupted sleep. "I can't afford to put up bail."

"There's nobody to visit him. He has no parents."

"He certainly doesn't have any parents."

"There is no way that boy murdered Walter and Bev. Multiple stab wounds? If the police knew him, they'd let him go."

"They're only doing their duty."

"You do yours, Rex."

He left firm instructions for her to record Leno every night. Gilman would try to watch the show on the East Coast, but he wanted a cassette tape of the monologue when his joke came up.

He dozed on the airplane most of the way. Many of the passengers were younger than he was. Some with children, others dressed as business people, they all looked stressed. Gilman was a lucky man, having eased through the system at the right time. He bought property when it was cheap. Now he owned his house in Sherman Oaks. Retired early, he was able to live off income from investments. All that money had been earned and saved when taxes were lower. The salary Dandy earned in the hair salon on Ventura Boulevard was gravy. She kept working because she liked her clients.

Montreal was below the airplane. They were coming in to land at Mirabel. Gilman had chosen the Canadian destination after consulting a map to find Harper's Landing. It was a closer drive down across the border than it would have been coming up from New York.

The rental car was waiting. Gilman telephoned his wife from a booth in the terminal, reporting his safe arrival. Then he found his way onto the autoroute heading south. After so many years in L.A. smog, he had forgotten what a blue sky looks like. The road took him around the metropolis; he caught a glimpse of a crouching mountain draped in haze. He crossed the river and began to speed past the Eastern Townships. Gilman realized he was enjoying himself to the limit. Timmy Williamson was being held for murder and he, himself, had been turned loose.

The border crossing at Rouse's Point took no time at all. Then he was back to speed, cruising past Plattsburg, heading for Harper's Landing. His first glimpse of the town came when he crested a hill and looked down on the mirror surface of Lake Champlain. He saw houses hidden among trees, a marina, the sharp line of a pier.

Gilman took a chance on the Wild Duck Motel. He signed in and paid for three nights. He had no idea how long this was going to take. He was not even sure they were still holding the boy here.

When he telephoned from Los Angeles, somebody at the courthouse had told him they might move the prisoner to Albany.

But when he found the granite building that housed the municipal court, the police, and the fire department, Gilman was told this was the place. Detective Sergeant Stabler wanted to see him first. Then he could spend some time with Williamson.

Stabler was courteous; he got up and came around his desk to shake Gilman's hand. He was a man probably in his thirties, stocky, with wavy blond hair too long for a cop, and sky-blue eyes. He seemed to be deferring to Gilman's age. "You've come a long way, sir. The boy will be glad to see you."

"I only hope there's something I can do."

"He can use your moral support. People in town are staying away."

"Do you think he's guilty? My wife can't buy it. I suppose I think he's innocent, too."

"We aren't allowed to suppose. Without telling anybody, Timmy Williamson flew to the West Coast. Not just a visit. He was gone for good. Days later, Iris Lucas wonders why she hasn't seen her neighbors. She pokes around their house, finds an open door, goes inside. She discovers them both, in separate rooms, stabbed to death. The murder weapon is on the floor, near the mother. She was the second victim. It looked as if she'd been trying to escape."

"What was the weapon?" For the first time, Gilman was acquiring a sense of what had happened.

"It was a dagger. The kind they call a dirk. It's a Scottish thing. This one belonged to a man named James McClelland. He works part-time as a plumber, but he's known in town as a piper. He shows up at events in full Highland regalia and plays the bagpipes. The dirk is worn tucked in one of his socks."

"I should think you'd suspect McClelland."

Stabler's eyelids closed and opened slowly. "McClelland loaned the dirk to Timmy Williamson. He wore it as part of his costume in the school production of *Hamlet*. Apparently, he had not yet given the weapon back."

"Did you see the play?"

"My sister took me. She teaches at the high school."

"Was Timmy any good?"

"I was surprised. You think of Shakespeare as boring, but it grabs you." The detective looked out the window. "I liked it at the end when the other guy says, 'And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest!'"

Traffic rolled in the street outside. A telephone rang down the hall. Gilman said, "The boy did not flee. He came back home to California. If somebody committed such a terrible crime, wouldn't he try to disappear?"

"Maybe. Maybe not."

"How could a kid do that to his parents? Do you think he's a multiple personality?"

"That possibility is being explored. We've established he had arguments with both the deceased."

"That was a difference over going to college. He wanted to attend drama school."

"Mrs. Lucas says it came close to violence. You may not know the boy as well as you think."

"I keep hearing 'Mrs. Lucas.' In crime stories, the police usually start with the person who finds the body."

Stabler glanced at his watch. "This is an old, frail lady. She did not attack and kill two vigorous people with a knife. Maybe you'd like to go in and see Timmy now?"

Gilman got up. "I suppose there's no chance of bailing him out. Even if I could raise the money."

"He's comfortable, Mr. Gilman. We're not depriving him."

Gilman waited in a bare room furnished with a metal table bolted to the floor. Benches on either side were part of the table's frame. A uniformed officer brought Timmy into the room. He was dressed in an orange one-piece suit, the collar open. His face looked bloodless and stiff. Tears filled his eyes when he saw his visitor.

"Uncle Rex! Thanks for coming."

The handshake turned into a hug. "That's okay, Timmy. That's okay."

"Everybody believes I killed them."

"I don't. Dandy doesn't."

"I fought with my parents. I left town. The police are lazy. Why should they search any further?"

"Stabler saw your Hamlet. He thinks you were good."

This silenced Timmy. He dry-washed his face with both hands. Then he said, "Stabler is the son of a local hero. His father was Sid Stabler, also a cop. Sid did something that has never happened before or since in Harper's Landing. He tracked down a crazed gunman who had killed three people."

"When was this?"

"Fifteen years ago. They still talk about it. Officer Sid discovered the killer was hiding in a houseboat at the end of the marina."

There was no time to summon backup. Or he didn't want to endanger anybody else. He went in after this maniac who had nothing to lose."

"What happened?"

"An exchange of gunfire. Sid took one in the chest. He died from it a few minutes later. But before he died, he got in a head shot which killed the murderer instantly."

Gilman thought about that. "Young Stabler has a reputation to live up to."

"People automatically think of him as a hero, too," Timmy said.

"Anyway, he liked your performance on stage."

"I was terrible. But I know I could be better. Now I'll never get the chance."

Gilman drove back to the motel. There was a diner next door. He ate a chicken salad and drank a pot of coffee. Then he went to his unit and dialed Dandy's number.

"Two calls in one day," was his wife's reaction. "Did you flirt with the stewardess?"

He described his visit to the courthouse, told her what he thought of Sergeant Stabler, tried to put into words his view of how the prisoner was bearing up. Then he said, "He thinks they're going to railroad him."

"Why would they do that?"

"It sort of makes sense. The lady next door heard this major fight. Then he flew to the coast." Something was bothering Gilman. "And that's a funny thing."

"What do you mean?"

"I've only been here a few hours. But I'm getting an impression of this town and its people. It's a place unto itself. They don't trust Timmy Williamson any longer. They believe he would be capable of the most despicable crime. And do you know why?"

"Because he packed his bags and left town."

"Bingo," Gilman said.

Dandridge Gilman asked Rex what he intended to do, now that he was near the scene of the crime. He said he intended to drive up into the hills next day, to Lakeview Lane, where the Williamson house was located. There, he would prowl around and see what he could see. And if Iris Lucas was at home, he would have a word with her.

After breakfast on the following morning, Rex did just that. He followed a winding road up and away from the waterfront, con-

sulting a map drawn for him by the clerk behind the motel desk.

The Williamson home turned out to be a ranch-style bungalow with a blue shingle roof and blue shutters against white clapboard. It was bordered on one side by a grassy slope. The cottage on the other side had to be the home of Iris Lucas.

A woman came to the door while Gilman was still on the sidewalk between houses. "What do you want?" She was no bigger than a child, holding a belligerent pose in the doorway. Her jaw was set, eyebrows a flat line under a crown of tight grey curls. "I'll call the police. You aren't supposed to be staring at my house!"

Gilman recognized her as one of those aggressive ancients, in her seventies with another two decades to go. As he approached, he identified himself. "I've come from California. My wife and I were friends of Walter and Bev Williamson. You must be Iris Lucas. Call me Rex!"

The leap to first names served a purpose. The old woman was lonely, she was ready to dismiss formalities. "Come inside, Rex," she said. "I'll bet you could use a cup of tea."

She gave him a choice of Earl Grey or jasmine. He cemented their relationship by opting for the former. She toddled around the kitchen with kettle and cups while he sat at the table and described his meeting with Sergeant Stabler.

"The police have an easy case here. The guilty party is under arrest."

"Do you really think so?" Gilman accepted a cup of the aromatic brew.

"I heard the argument the night before the boy fled. It was brutal. Doors slamming, things being thrown around. I heard the mother scream. Then it went silent. Days later, I went in and found the bodies." The old woman was feeling strong emotion. "A mother is better off dead if her son is capable of such a crime."

For perhaps a minute, Gilman sipped tea in silence. Then he said, "But you did not actually see Timmy stab his parents."

"No. But I can put two and two together."

"You have no doubt at all?"

"Doubt? Remember, I saw the bodies." Iris seemed to go into a trance. She began to recite:

"He who doubts from what he sees
Will never believe, do what you please.
If the Sun and Moon should doubt,
They'd immediately go out."

She smiled, satisfied with the reaction on her visitor's face. "William Blake," she said.

"But surely there must be other suspects." He recalled a name. "What about James McClelland? I was told the murder weapon belonged to him."

"You can forget James. Stabler checked him out on the first day. He drinks to excess. So you might believe he could go crazy and do something like this."

"That's what I mean."

"But James has an alibi. He's a plumber by trade. The medical examiner set a time for the killing, a space of several hours. During that period, McClelland was in the garage of an apartment building on the other side of the lake. There was a major leak in some old water pipes. Dozens of people watched him working."

Gilman was disappointed. "Can you think of anybody else?"

"Poor man, you're desperate to free Timmy Williamson. But he killed his parents, Rex." She refilled his cup from a white ceramic pot with cherries on the lid. "I suppose you might consider Manuela Cortez."

"Who's she?"

"The cleaning lady. She came once a week to vacuum and polish and wash clothes. She was in the house the day before the murders. But Bev Williamson sent her away."

"Why?"

"Because her work was getting sloppy. Bev told her to shape up. Manuela pleaded she'd hurt her back. She was doing the best she could. But Bev learned the woman had taken on extra clients. She was only able to do half as much for each."

Gilman remembered his friend from years ago. "Bev would never stand for that."

"So you have an angry woman who's just been fired. But can you see her slaughtering the Williamsons with a knife?"

The front door opened and closed. Heavy footsteps approached down the hallway. "It's Perry!" Mrs. Lucas's face brightened as a portly man entered the kitchen. He was well groomed, dark hair centrally parted and slicked back behind tiny ears. A thin moustache divided a long upper lip. Iris swelled with pride. "Mr. Gilman, meet my son Perry."

Perry Lucas worked as headwaiter at Serafina, the finest restaurant in Harper's Landing. He was a loyal son who visited his mother once a week, without fail. If she needed money, he put

some in her purse. He also delivered a sack of dirty laundry and collected last week's load, neatly folded.

Lucas had no time for tea. "I'm finishing up my essay, Mother. I want to put it in the mail this afternoon." Perry Lucas was taking a university extension course leading to a degree in English Literature. Gilman admired that, and said so.

Lucas and Gilman left the house together. Perry was carrying his clean laundry. Iris said, "You're missing a shirt. I couldn't get the stains out so I threw it away."

The men got into their separate cars. Gilman drove slowly, letting the local man take the lead. He followed Perry's car down the winding road. It might be useful to know where the headwaiter lived. It turned out to be not far from Serafina. Lucas drove past the restaurant, turned a corner, and parked in front of a brick dwelling with two doorways. Gilman kept his distance. He watched Lucas let himself in.

The stained shirt was an intriguing development. It might or might not mean anything. The hot-tempered cleaning lady with the bad back, Manuela Cortez, was a remote possibility. He would mention her to Sergeant Stabler.

An idea occurred to Gilman. A telephone call to the police station established that the detective was in. And yes, he would be happy to join the California visitor as his guest for lunch. At Serafina? Fine choice.

Lucas was quick on his feet. He went blank for only a moment as the men approached his station. Then he snatched two menus from the rack. "Nonsmoking, gentlemen? Right this way."

Throughout the meal, Gilman kept an eye on Perry Lucas. The waiters and busboys took their cues from him. He was always on the move, his energy setting the pace for the busy restaurant.

Going at a plate of ribs with both hands, Detective Stabler said, "What's on your mind? This is good, by the way."

"I was with Iris Lucas this morning. She said something interesting. Perry came by to pick up his clean laundry. The old lady told him she'd been unable to get the stain out of a shirt of his, so she threw it away."

"Which means?"

"Isn't it a clue? I know Lucas doesn't live there anymore. But he visits all the time."

"And here's his shirt covered with blood, right?" The detective used yet another giant paper napkin to wipe barbecue sauce from

his fingers. "So we arrest him for murder. Think, Mr. Gilman. Name the possible stains. Coffee? Ink? Grass? Blueberry pie? Motor oil? Anyway, we don't have the shirt."

"But doesn't it raise a whisper of doubt? Maybe Timmy Williamson didn't kill his parents."

"You should have been a defense lawyer."

The headwaiter approached the table. "Everything all right, gentlemen?"

"Perfect," the policeman said.

"I need the ketchup," Gilman said. Then he added, responding to a wild impulse, "And why did you kill the Williamsons?"

Lucas found a bottle of ketchup on a side counter. Then he was gone. "What about that?" Gilman hissed. "He didn't even react!"

"He may not have heard you."

"He heard. An innocent man would have asked what I was talking about."

"Don't ever do that again. You're leaving town soon. I have to go on working here."

Gilman concentrated on his veal cutlet. Then he said, "Manuela Cortez had motive. My friend Bev fired her for shoddy work when the poor woman had a bad back."

"The Cortez woman was one of the first people I talked to. On the day the murders were committed, she was at a clinic in Orchard Hill taking treatment for her back." The policeman drank some beer. "You're a nice man, Mr. Gilman. You flew in here like a California angel, come to save your old friend's son. But if he's guilty, he's guilty."

Gilman came to his main point. "I want you to let Timmy Williamson out of jail for one afternoon. Hear me out. I don't think he'll try to run."

"What are you doing to me?"

"Bring him to the house on Lakeview Lane. I want him to go over it and see if anything is missing."

"There was no break-in."

"What if there was something valuable in there that somebody wanted? And now it's gone. We'd never know, but Timmy could tell."

"You two may be setting this up. He says, 'Where's the emerald necklace that used to be in Mother's dresser?' You'll claim that shows there was an intruder. But all it does is muddy the waters."

Gilman looked Stabler in the eye. "I heard about your father," he said. "You're like him. So am I. And we both know I'd never pull a trick like that to free a guilty man."

After some consideration, the detective said, "Give me time to clear it with the chief. I'll call you at your motel."

Rex Gilman made himself comfortable on the bed. He drew the telephone close, picked up the receiver, and dialed Dandy's number in Sherman Oaks. His wife came on the line sounding troubled. "Oh dear, I was afraid it would be you."

"What's the matter?"

"He used your joke last night. Jay Leno."

"Did you tape it?"

"Yes. But nobody laughed."

Gilman said nothing.

"He ad-libbed one of those funny things."

"What was it?"

"He said, 'That joke was a safety test. To see how quickly we can clear the auditorium.'"

Gilman experienced a sweet sadness. This was a severe bump in the road. It hurt, crossing it. But the road went on. They rejected his film treatment time and again. They bought a joke, but it bombed. He could quit, or go on writing. It was up to him.

"What's happening with Timmy?" his wife asked.

Some people were in real trouble. The boy came to Los Angeles to enroll in drama school. Before you could say Lee Strasberg, he was back home in jail, charged with murdering his parents. Gilman focused. "I'm about to free him," he said. "And find the real killer."

"How are you going to do that, dear?"

"I'm not sure. But it should happen soon. Then I'm coming home."

Lieutenant Stabler broke the police seal on the front door. The boy entered the house; Rex Gilman and the cop followed him inside. The rooms were clogged with a heavy silence. Timmy began in the living room, moving slowly, looking everywhere, touching nothing.

With his eyes closed, he said, "Where were Dad and Mom found?"

Stabler glanced at Gilman as if to say, "Clever question!" Then he described where the bodies had lain, the father in the library, the mother by the kitchen door.

"There's nothing missing here," Timmy said. "Let's try the library."

It was a medium-sized room, bookshelves covering two walls. A pair of upholstered chairs rested on either side of a fireplace. Each chair was escorted by a small table and a reading lamp.

Timmy went to one of the shelves. "The dirk was lying here," he said. "I kept meaning to give it back to Mr. McClelland. The murderer must have been standing about here when my father came into the room. He grabbed up the dagger and used it."

"Sounds right to me," Gilman said.

Timmy turned to the books lining the shelves. He saw the empty space immediately. They all saw it. "The Blake collection!" he said. "It's gone."

Stabler took an interest. "Tell us about it."

"My mother owned a volume of the poems and prints of William Blake. It was a nineteenth-century edition, probably worth a lot of money. I used to look at it." The boy quoted: "'Tiger! Tiger! burning bright, in the forests of the night . . .'" The engravings were something else. Those solid-looking people, and all the flaming angels."

"Was she a collector?"

"No. This was the only valuable book in the house. Mom's father was a bomber pilot in World War Two. He was stationed at a base in England. He was sort of adopted by a family who lived in a big house near the base. He made it through his tour of operations and was going home. They gave him the Blake out of their library as a sign of gratitude and respect."

Gilman broke the silence. "Isn't it obvious, Stabler? Somebody was in here. Somebody who knew about the book. The house must have been empty. Did your parents lock their doors, Timmy?"

"Never the kitchen door."

"So the person came right in. He went to the library and found what he was looking for. But the Williamsons showed up unexpectedly. The intruder grabbed the dagger off the shelf and . . ."

"It's a theory," Stabler conceded.

"And I know who did it. Guess what? When I had my chat with Iris Lucas the other day, she recited a verse to make a point. And she named the poet—William Blake!"

"You're not accusing that old lady?"

"I'm accusing her son, Perry. I heard him say he's working towards a degree in English Literature. He'd appreciate Blake. He might want to possess such a precious volume of his work. Remember the shirt with the stain? The one his mother threw away?" Stabler was wavering. Gilman hit him again. "I'm not saying you arrest him right now. I'm suggesting we have a talk with the man. After you've put your suspect back in his cell."



"This is all speculation," Stabler said, "unless we find the stolen book."

"If I'm right," Gilman said, "he'll lead us to it."

They were waiting in Stabler's car across the street from Serafina. They had been inside for a quick word with the headwaiter. The policeman told him they had learned the Blake was missing. He was going to be searching the premises of anyone who was connected even remotely with the case.

Mrs. Lucas was a candidate, since she discovered the bodies. They would check out her home. Perry was being asked to offer his apartment for inspection, too. Would this evening be okay?

"I don't think we'll have long to wait," Gilman concluded.

Perry Lucas was leaving the restaurant. He headed on foot to the corner, turned, and almost ran the short distance to his dwelling on the side street. Stabler cruised after him and pulled into a parking space. "Don't go in yet," Gilman advised. "He could say he's here to wait for a telephone call. Let him come out."

Lucas did come out, holding under his arm something solid wrapped in a plastic bag. "We can arrest him now," Stabler said. "That must be the book."

"Aren't you curious to see where he takes it?"

The car moved slowly. Lucas led on until he arrived at a large brick building with double glass doors.

Gilman clapped his hands. "What better place to hide a book than in a public library!"

"Now we hurry," Stabler said.

It was an imposing place for a town the size of Harper's Landing. Gilman inhaled the smell of cloth bindings. Stabler was leading the way. They had Lucas in sight. He seemed to know where he was going. This was a separate room devoted to reference books. The waiter went to a section labeled "Motor Mechanics." Here, he removed a volume from the bag and slid it onto a shelf.

Stabler was at his shoulder. He put his hand on the book as Lucas let it go. "William Blake," he said, reading the gold letters on the spine. "You are under arrest, Perry Lucas, for the murder of Walter and Beverly Williamson." And then he recited the man's rights.

Dandy and Rex always got their best talking done in bed. Rex was so keyed up from his flight that he was beyond sleep.

"The Motor Mechanics section is a good choice. Somebody looking for a text on grinding valves would pass over the Blake. And it isn't a library book so the staff wouldn't be searching for it. Any-

way, Lucas only wanted to store it there until his place had been searched."

Dandy ran her hand inside her husband's pajama sleeve for warmth. "So he killed them for the book?"

"It was a spontaneous act. Stabler got him to talk about it. Lucas knew of the book from earlier visits. Walter showed it off. Lucas coveted it. He offered to buy it. Walter said no."

"Lucas is one of those people who stewes."

"He stewed. For months. He could buy an edition of Blake. But it wouldn't be like this one. I saw it. Each page is a work of art. He not only wrote the material, he hand-lettered it, he illustrated it, he drew stuff in the margins. Then he engraved it and pulled proofs. And then he colored each page by hand."

Gilman was finally on the verge of sleep. He murmured, "People placed no value on his work. He could not sell it." Thoughts began to slide. "Blake was an original. A crazy angel."

"Did Iris Lucas know what Perry did?"

"We'll never prove it. But I believe she suspected he was the killer. She must have seen the book. She quoted a verse from it the day I saw her. And that may be why she overemphasized Timmy's argument with his parents. She was protecting her precious son."

After a while, Dandy said, "Is Timmy coming back?"

"When he takes care of the estate."

"How will he be, emotionally?"

"Jury still out."

It was time to close down for the night. Rex Gilman selected one of his favorite fantasies to go out on. Jay Leno was behind the desk, introducing his next guest.

"Here is a very special man," he said. "He's the guy who writes the lines that make Americans laugh. I could never do this show without the input of this unique man. He's here in town, fresh from the island he bought with the royalties from his last book." Leno got to his feet. "Let's welcome the world's funniest writer, and a classy gentleman—Rex Gilman!"

The crowd delivered a standing ovation while Gilman approached the TV host. Jay's arms were extended to embrace him, and as Gilman stepped up onto the raised part of the set, he fell asleep. ●

RUMPOLE AND THE NANNY SOCIETY

by John Mortimer

"R

umpole! Put on that nice scarf I gave you for Christmas. There's a nasty wind about and we don't want you laid up. Or sneezing all over the place! Oh, and Rumpole! I hope you gargled this morning. You won't be much good in court with a sore throat, will you?" She Who Must Be Obeyed was in her most nanny-like mode, but I was halfway out of the front door, so I called back, "Yes, I gargled, and I've got wellie boots on in case it rains, so thanks, Nurse." And I was down the stairs and off to work before she could remind me to trap the germs in my hanky and chew my food at least twenty times before swallowing.

It was the same on the tube. Government Health Warnings! "Don't smoke." "Don't drink!" "Observe personal hygiene, wash fore and aft at least once a day." "Too many calories lead to heart disease!" When I arrived at the Temple Station, I called in at the Tastee-Bite for a healthy breakfast (two eggs on a fried slice, bacon and sausage, with coffee and a couple of pieces of well-buttered toast), lit a small cigar, coughed happily, and struggled down to the Old Bailey to defend one of the Timson family of South London villains, who didn't remember that warehouse breaking is a serious danger to health, before a judge who took snuff and quite failed, during the ensuing sneeze, to trap his germs in his red and

"Rumpole joins Columbo as the only really great detective figures created for television," says William DeAndrea in *Encyclopedia Mysterosa*. Seen on Thames TV in Britain, the Rumpole series airs frequently on PBS's *Mystery* in the U.S. Unlike most Rumpole cases, the following story was not first a teleplay. †

white spotted handkerchief. I was spending the day as far away as possible from the Nanny Society.

And speaking of the Nanny Society reminds me of a small mystery I was able to penetrate by the use of a logical mind and that common sense which is far more important in the life of an Old Bailey hack than any knowledge of the law (I have always found that knowing the law rather tends to cramp my style).

It started one summer. My wife, Hilda (known to me only as She Who Must Be Obeyed), was away on a visit to her friend Dodo Macintosh in Cornwall, a treat I had managed to avoid by pleading pressure of work. In fact, work wasn't very pressing that summer, even the Timsons seemed to have stopped burgling and gone off to the Costa del Crime. I was looking after myself in the Gloucester Road and spending the evenings in the old Crouchback Arms, which is handy for Froxbury Mansions. I was in there one evening when I found myself at a table near three youngish, good-looking girls, a blonde with a Swedish accent, a dark-haired girl with an Irish brogue, and a redheaded English girl. They were drinking respectively a pint of beer, a Guinness, and a repellent mixture of Avocat and lemonade which I have learnt from Dot Clopton, our beautiful typist, is called a "Snowball." I thought, at first, they were discussing their lovers or even husbands.

"You should try living with Justin," said the English girl (pint of beer). "The bugger's got such a filthy temper! Throws his breakfast at you and then sulks."

"My Neville's quite good-looking," the Irish voice (Guinness) complained. "But he's thicker than two planks. Can't do up his shoelaces, let alone zip up his flies."

"I'm thinking of leaving my Max," the Swede (with the Snowball) said. "He swears horribly and collects pictures of Madonna. And he's always sick at parties."

Thinking how unhappy their love lives must be, I shot a smile in their direction. The English girl looked through me, so I turned my attention to my bangers and mash, tepid from the microwave. I listened hard to their subsequent conversation, but they made no mention of me. I did discover, however, that they were called Petronella, Siobhan, and Kirsti, that they were all three nannies, and what they had been discussing were not the character defects of their lovers, but their charges. Soon the conversation turned to the failings of their employers, from whose loins Max, Justin, and Neville had sprung.

"Mrs. Gregthorpe stays in bed drinking all the morning. She

gets up at lunchtime and complains she's feeling exhausted. I'm really sorry for poor Mr. Gregthorpe. He looks so sad sometimes." Kirsti was smiling quite cheerfully as she told them this.

"Mrs. Reel's carrying on with a Turkish estate agent," Siobhan said. "And whenever Mr. Reel sees me, he sings 'When Irish Eyes Are Shining' in a fake Dublin accent."

"The Spokes have a fluffy cover on their loo seat." Petronella spoke with disgust. "And Judge Spoke told me they have specially friendly parties once a month, so they send Justin to stay with his granny, and he'd like me to join in."

"A judge said that?" Siobhan was surprised. I wasn't.

"I think he's rather a common sort of judge," Petronella told them.

A few nights later, they were in the Crouchback again, spreading even more malicious gossip. Kirsti said she had come home from shopping and was honestly surprised and delighted to see Petronella coming out of the Gregthorpes' home in Launceston Place. It seemed that Justin and Max went to the same nursery school, and Petronella had forgotten the date of Max's birthday party. "And Mr. Gregthorpe remembered it?" Kirsti was laughing at such improbability.

"He did. I was amazed. He seemed to have a terrible cold. I thought he was rather sad."

"And Mrs. Gregthorpe was drunk in bed upstairs. Poor Mr. Gregthorpe is very sad, but not attractive."

"Oh no," Petronella agreed. "Not at all attractive."

Later, on my way to the Gents, I passed Petronella telephoning in the draughty passage. I overheard her saying something which I had good cause to remember in the months to come.

A week later, Petronella and Siobhan were having a drink together, but there was no sign of Kirsti. I listened hard and soon learned the reason. Mrs. Gregthorpe had missed a valuable emerald and diamond ring. For some reason she had suspected Kirsti and searched her room. It was not long before she found this precious jewellery hidden away among the Swedish girl's sweaters. Mrs. Gregthorpe had telephoned the police and her nanny was now under arrest and charged with theft. Before I left the pub that night, I wrote the name and number of Mr. Bernard, the Timsons' family solicitor, on a piece of paper and handed it to Siobhan, telling her that the best legal team in the country was at the disposal of their friend. She smiled and thanked me, promising to hand over the glad tidings to the unfortunate Swede. "Tell her not to have a moment's fear," I

told them. "Rumpole of the Bailey is galloping to the rescue."

It never looked an easy case and didn't start well when it came on before Judge Bullingham, the Mad Bull, in Number 4 Court at the Old Bailey. Kirsti had told the police she hadn't taken the ring, had no idea how it got among her sweaters. The prosecution opening suggested that there could only be one explanation. Mrs. Gregthorpe gave evidence. A diamond in the ring needed resetting and she had given it to her husband about four days previously, in its box, to take to the jeweller's. As was his habit, he had forgotten to do this and the box stayed in his study (Gregthorpe was a best-selling writer of sex and spy stories), until the day after Max's birthday party, which was the twenty-second of June. Then she had asked about the ring and was told it was still in the study.

She opened the box, she said, "to make sure it was still there," and found to her horror "that the box was empty." They started to search the house and, Kirsti being out fetching Max from nursery school, they went through her clothes and found the ring.

James Gregthorpe was called next. He agreed that his wife gave him the ring to take to the jeweller's on the nineteenth of June. So far as he knew, no one had taken it from his study, but when he and his wife looked in the box on the twenty-third it was gone. He was a tall, fairly handsome man with soft, spaniel's eyes and a certain weakness about the mouth. He seemed nervous while looking, I thought with genuine concern, at the girl in the dock. When he did, she smiled back bravely, and a hint of a defence began to form in my mind. Gregthorpe and Kirsti, I thought, had more in common than the care of little Max. They were people who had been, or perhaps still were, in love.

"Mr. Gregthorpe," I asked, when I rose to cross-examine, "were you in love with your son Max's nanny?"

"Mr. Rumpole!" The Mad Bull, scarlet in the face, lowered his head and charged into the arena. "How can this be relevant?"

"If your Lordship refuses to allow the question," I said, "I shall go straight to the Court of Appeal."

About the only thing the Bull fears is the Court of Appeal. "You may ask it, I suppose," he grumbled. "I very much doubt if it'll do you much good with the jury."

"I thought she was a very nice girl," Gregthorpe conceded. "I won't say I was in love with her."

"Did you ever tell anyone you were in love with her, or had been in love with her?"

"No."

"There, Mr. Rumpole," the Mad Bull roared with considerable satisfaction. "You've got your answer!" But I hadn't. Not quite.

When the prosecution evidence was finished, I said I wouldn't be calling my client, everything she knew about the matter was in her statement to the police, but I would be calling a Miss Petronella Sanderson, who was in court and prepared to give evidence on behalf of the defence. Petronella went into the box and seemed confident enough. She gave Kirsti an excellent character and then I asked her about the day my client had seen her coming out of the house in Launceston Place. She said she'd spoken to Mr. Gregthorpe on that occasion, but Mrs. Gregthorpe was upstairs in bed.

"How long were you in the house?"

Petronella paused, looked at Kirsti, and said, "I suppose about half an hour, perhaps more."

"Half an hour to find out the date of Max's birthday party?"

"We talked about other things."

"Had you met James Gregthorpe before?"

"Yes." Petronella looked uneasy.

"How many times?"

"Perhaps half a dozen. The boys went to the same nursery school."

"And did you talk about Kirsti?"

"Yes, sometimes."

"What did he tell you about Kirsti?" I looked among my papers hoping to convince the witness that I had a statement from Kirsti detailing the conversation. The trick worked. "Did he tell you they were lovers?" It was a risk, one of the biggest I have taken. The rule is never to ask a question unless you know the answer, but from Kirsti's look of panic and Petronella's confusion, I knew I'd scored a bull's eye.

"Well, yes," she said. "If you like. He told me he'd been in love with her."

"Not if I like. Is that the truth?"

"Yes." Petronella was quiet now, almost inaudible, so that the Bull had to roar. "Keep your voice up, Miss Sanderson."

"Yes, my Lord."

"And what was the date of this conversation?"

"It was two days before Max's birthday."

"So this was on the twentieth of June. Did you speak to Mr. Gregthorpe in his study?"

"Yes."

"Where we know the box with the ring in it was. Did James Gregthorpe leave the room while you were there together?"

"I think he went to the lavatory. He wasn't feeling well."

"How long was he away?"

"I suppose five minutes."

"Time enough for you to take the ring, run up the stairs with it to Kirsti's room, and hide it among the sweaters she wouldn't be wearing in June."

The learned counsel for the prosecution was summoning up his strength to object to my cross-examining my own witness, so I carried on without drawing a breath.

"Because you wanted to get Kirsti into trouble. Get her sent to prison, and perhaps back to Sweden."

"Why?"

"Because you were jealous of her. Because you were having an affair with Gregthorpe yourself, and that was why you kept meeting. I don't know where you met, but I do know you were jealous of Kirsti. He'd been in love with her, perhaps he was in love with her still. It was a chance too good to miss. Isn't that the truth, Miss Petronella Sanderson?"

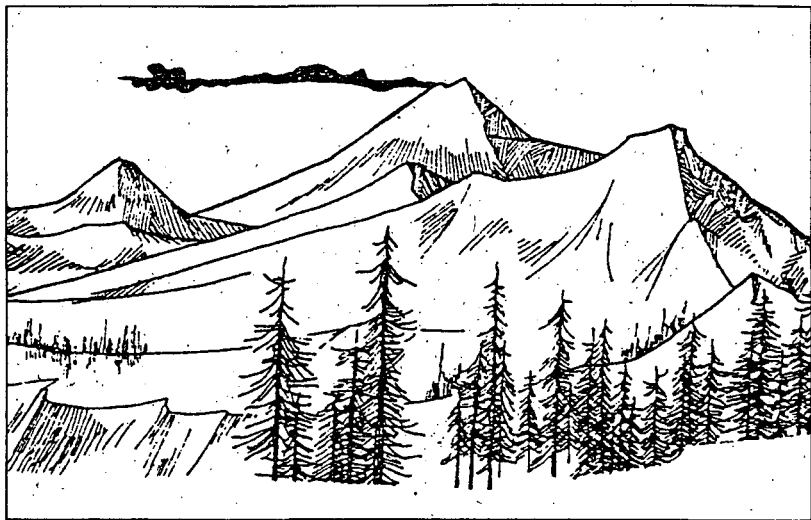
Petronella was silent. She was looking round the court, amazed and frightened. She stared at Kirsti, as though she must have discovered the truth, but Kirsti looked away. She looked at the Bull, but he was indulging in a rare moment of silence. She looked at the jury, but they stared back at her without smiling. She avoided looking at me. Then she lowered her eyes and quietly, in the stillness of the court, she said, "I don't think you can prove any of that."

It wasn't an admission, but then it wasn't a denial either. It was enough to make the jury think that my reconstruction of the events might be true.

Enough to give them a reasonable doubt, so that they could do what they secretly wanted to do and acquit the blond and beautiful Swede.

"Whatever gave you the idea that Petronella and Gregthorpe were having an affair?" Bony Bernard, my instructing solicitor, and partner in crime, asked as we left the court.

"I heard her telephoning James from a pub. She said he must be careful of his cold and be sure to wear his raincoat when he went out and not get wet. When a woman starts to treat a man as though she were his nanny, you may be sure she has some deep and lasting relationship with him." ●



THE ROAD

by Suzanne Jones

H

arvey "Bing" Heil was back on that road. He could feel the dust between his six-year-old toes, the heat of the Arkansas summer pressing down on his hair and shoulders like a heavy, musty shawl. He had become tired of the indifference of his older cousins, the smell of the tank where they had gone to fish, and he wanted some lemonade and to sit in the shade and be fussed over by his great-aunt. He was walking the quarter mile back to the farmhouse alone because no one wanted to take him back, and bad things did not happen to little white boys on lonely country roads in that part of the country in that more innocent time.

It was not a dream but a memory which Bing had stored in his mind as carefully as his grandmother used to store the lace lingerie she'd get for Christmas deep in the bottom of her bureau, wrapped in tissue paper. When she died, the drawer had been lined with the gifts the old woman had judged too fine to wear for everyday.

Again Bing saw the figure of the large black man coming toward him across the narrow little stone bridge over the deep gully, and the white truck behind the man, which had come pouring down the hill, sending a plume of dust behind it the way a fast boat throws up water. He heard again the impatient blasts of the horn. Again saw the black man turn his head to look over his shoulder at the truck but not to move out of its way to the side of the bridge. The man just kept walking at the same slow, loose-jointed gait, forcing the truck to brake almost to a stop.

Bing heard the angry shouts from the driver of the truck, but if the black man did, he did not turn his head, nor step aside. Then the truck roared and leapt forward, its right fender catching the black man on his left hip, spinning him against the side of the bridge and sending him cartwheeling heavily through space to the bottom of the gully where he lay as still as a heap of old clothes.

Later Bing had been taken by his great-uncle to the sheriff's office, which smelled of tobacco and sweat, and had his story listened to with courteous indifference. Through the tears of anger and frustration, he learned something that day which would stay with him the rest of his life:

Reality wasn't something fixed but mutable. Protean. What he had witnessed that afternoon could change when viewed from a smelly, dirty office with aged Wanted posters curling on the walls, instead of a hot, dusty road. What was deliberate could become accidental. What was real was dependent entirely upon the power of the observer both to interpret and enforce it.

Bing had grown up to be a small, neat man with large, intelligent eyes and the splendid mellow voice, so attractive to women, that had given him his nickname. After college it was only natural

Like the developer in "The Road," author Suzanne Jones once tried her hand investing in the volatile Colorado real estate market. As always, she brings her experience to bear in a unique way, creating a story with many psychological layers which probes the motivation for a murder rather than its method. Ms. Jones wrote and sold her first story to *EQMM* in the mid 1980's. †

that he would use his great-uncle's connections to go into the diplomatic service.

In State he was a minor functionary only. He understood that he would never have a better assignment than his last one, which had been to Pretoria, where the most interesting part of his job was visiting the jail to inquire after some servant or other of the embassy who had been picked up for questioning. Those were the highly charged, fearful days before Mandela was released. Bing was not caught up in the passions of that country except for a natural concern that he be identified with the ruling class because of an accident of color. It must be admitted, however, that he admired the stubborn confidence the Afrikaners had in their system of social beliefs, even though he did not share them, either professionally or personally. He admired also, but was intimidated by, the savage power of their police. They were almost all of them Kenyans, tribesmen chosen for their brutality and fierceness. Traits that occasionally could be used to advantage. And because Bing was no better than he should have been, he was able to use his post to add considerably to the money his grandparents had left him, eventually having enough to leave State to start his construction company in Colorado in a time of rapidly escalating land values.

He liked building things. Solid things of wood and steel and stone. He was able to build high-quality, expensive homes and make a handsome profit and believed that he had discovered in himself qualities that would ensure his success in the construction industry. Qualities which had been largely wasted in the fluid morality of diplomacy (Bing not being better born): the willingness to work hard, a pride in that work, and a keen if opportunistic sense of business.

He became a wealthy man and married a woman who was wealthy in her own right. He was almost forty by then and well into his second career, but he still had most of his own hair and was very fit. His wife Carol was a little older but intelligent and attractive, with a sinewy, athletic body, and though they could have no children, they traveled well together, his business prospered, and he was reasonably content.

His wife was a trust-funder, but had not always been so. Her father had been an aerospace engineer who felt that both his daughters should be self-sufficient. So Carol had worked, in Aspen, as a waitress, ski instructor, and insurance clerk, and

crewed in the Bahamas. She'd been quite surprised when on reaching thirty she discovered that she never had to work again. But—although generous by nature—she had the caution inherent in someone who had come unexpectedly into money, who enjoyed having it enough to be determined never to be without it again. She knew it was not in her power to replace capital, once lost. Bing might share her income but could not touch the principal. It was not to be borrowed against. It was not to be used as security for anything.

Not that her attitude had mattered six years ago. Bing had plenty of money, much of which he had invested in Colorado's booming mountain property. He had developments near Winter Park and Vail. Business was good. But then, unaccountably, unpredictably, the oil bust struck at the heart of Denver's financial community, the price of mountain land began to plummet, and in the last few months he had been exposed for what he now feared he was, a man who had merely been very, very lucky, who had caught a wave of prosperity along with many others and had been swept along on its crest.

Now his luck and his money had dwindled away to the last piece of property, a handsome lot on the side of a hill just outside of Boulder with a fine view of the city and the plains beyond. Though it would be a near thing, he could do the finish work on the house himself before the construction loan came due. He had a buyer from Florida, a transferring IBM executive, who had readily agreed to his asking price. That money could be used to buy back some of the land Bing had been forced to let go. He could try again, be wiser, perhaps, and less conscientious in his selection of materials and less concerned with the quality of the work. His reputation should guarantee his success this time around, even though he was determined to shave his costs as closely as his competition. The houses would look as grand as ever. Only time would reveal that they were not.

He awoke the morning after the Simpsons' party staring at the ceiling and unwrapping that carefully-put-away memory of the black man on that dusty road. He turned his head and watched his wife pull on her jogging shorts with the same sad, empty feeling he had the night before.

He had gone onto the deck of the Simpsons' home to look at the view of Boulder by night, even though it was a chilly evening for August. There had been some unseasonable rain during the day.

Bing had built that home a year or so ago with pride, though little profit. The materials he had used were too expensive, the hours his men had put in were too long. The workmanship was too fine.

He had not meant to discover Carol there, leaning with a sigh against the body of the man, his hand resting possessively on the sweet curve of her hip. Bing stood quite still, waiting for the flood of adrenaline to hurl him forward like an animal, reducing him in an instant to savagery—but it never came. Instead he felt only a profound sadness, as if she were already dead. The lovers had not noticed him, and he went quietly back inside.

Bing was honest enough to realize that what he mostly mourned was the loss of her feeling for him. The way she had once looked at him. The eagerness of her body. He wondered if he had ever cared for her, or if it had been that feeling alone which had attracted and held him.

He had once read a story in which an alien on a distant world casually explained to a visitor why he could not stay for drinks: He had to go home and kill his wife. Only a slight inconvenience in that fictional culture in which killing a wife was a commonplace occurrence.

But killing a wife in Boulder, Colorado, was most inconvenient. Bing didn't even dislike Carol except mildly, certainly not enough to kill her, but he recognized that an opportunity was about to be lost. The machinery that would separate them might already be in motion. The visits to lawyers. The sorting out of the detritus of their lives: credit cards which must be changed; checking accounts; wills. It was only a matter of time before she approached him for her freedom. Then it would be too late. Killing her would become not only inconvenient, it would become dangerous. Then pointless.

If she were dead, he would have enough money to pay off the loan on the house himself and sell it at a more propitious time. Enough money to start buying back the land. The value would come back eventually, and he would have the capital to wait out this particular downturn. Then he could build again but more wisely.

He lay on his back with his eyes closed, pretending to sleep, and listening to her move about the bedroom. She liked to go for her run early, before it got too hot. And that was when he had come upon that memory of his childhood, and began to turn it over in his mind.

Then as he lay there, he thought of another child, a girl who

must be six or seven years older than he was then, but looked younger than she was. Allie. He had met her several weeks before the Simpsons' party.

He had gone to the job early, as usual. Parked his big white Chevrolet truck at the foot of the drive and climbed the walk up the hill, past scraps of shingle, concrete bags, ruined molding, the various litter of the job site, through the dusty smell of curing concrete and the raw, sweet smell of lumber and sawdust. He wished he'd had the Mexicans clean up the area before they left, but he didn't want to pay them for what he could do himself. He was out of cash. If he could have paid them, he wouldn't be staining the baseboards and trim himself, getting the stain under his fingernails and his cuticles so that his hands never really came clean. He had seen his wife look at his hands with distaste.

Bing was doing the things that morning that he had always done, even though the telephone call the evening before had ended the reason for doing so. The buyers were very sorry, but the transfer had not gone through. They would not be moving to Boulder after all. They wished him well while he wished that he had demanded more earnest money, but they had seemed like an answer to prayer at the time, and he had not wanted to disturb the deal. They were a bright young couple with two children. Bing had accepted their offer six months before house prices in Boulder began their latest downward slide. Too many upscale houses had been built. Now there were fewer Californians moving into the state. The realtor said apologetically that what was needed was one good earthquake to put things right and send them fleeing to Boulder. Bing would have a difficult time in getting even the loan value out of the house now. The realtor was sorry.

So even though Bing kept doing the things he always did—his body knew the routine—what he did now would only benefit the bank. The bank would take the house, and it would be over, this last desperate scramble to retain something of his image of himself.

That was of a man of substance, shrewd in his dealings, independent in his thought, confident in the way the world worked. Ex-diplomat, successful businessman. He had been almost certain—if only for a moment or two—that was the man that he had managed to become. That was, of course, before the price of land began to fall.

As it had done so, he discovered that he was more and more afraid. The fear leaked around his spine like cold water into

rubber boots. He feared failure as much as if it were the loss of a limb or disfigurement. Should he fail, he would be alive still. He could go on, but he would be diminished in a debilitating way, a devastating way. He would no longer be the man he was. Even if he had been that man only briefly, only for a moment.

Below the house he was building, down the steep wooded slope toward town, was a small black asphalt parking lot which adjoined a red brick building housing dentist and doctor's offices. To add to larger discomforts, Bing lost a filling that morning. He had slipped down the slope to see if the dentist there could fit him in. That he continued to behave as though he were in control of his life only mildly puzzled him. What else was he to do?

There were only a few cars in the parking lot. At one of them, an aged, pale green Buick, he saw the girl. She was trying to force a coat hanger through a crack in the window. She stopped to stare at him as he scrambled out of the trees.

She was a small, thin girl with round shoulders and concave chest. She had a heart-shaped face, long brown hair, and large, frightened brown eyes.

"Your mother lock her keys in the car?"

She nodded, her hands ceasing to work the wire. The nails of her fingers were very short and painted dark red. Through the window Bing could see the keys hanging from the ignition.

"May I help you?"

Again she nodded. Children usually trusted Bing. His size and the mellowness of his voice charmed them. Though he was flattered at their response to him, he just never had the inclination to start a family of his own. He married late, and now his wife was too old to bear children, even had she the desire.

He took the wire from the girl, worked it through the crack, pushed the crude loop at its end over the door lock, and after a few tries was able to pull it up. He opened the door, and she darted inside and retrieved the keys and ran toward the back of the red brick building.

"You're welcome," he called after her. He pushed the lock down and closed the car door. Then he followed her into the building down a long corridor to the office of a Benjamin Saner, D.D.S. There he found the girl sitting in the corner of the small lobby of the dentist's office, reading a Harlequin romance. She did not look up at him.

The receptionist had the same heart-shaped face as the girl.

"Get your keys all right?" he asked.

She looked at him uncomprehendingly. She was a small, neat, pretty woman in a white uniform.

"I helped your daughter break into the car out back."

She smiled then. She had a nice smile. "It's the third time this month it's happened to me. A lack of concentration that seems to be becoming a permanent condition."

Bing told her of his missing filling, and she promised to ease him in between patients. Tuesday wasn't usually a very busy day, but most of the morning was taken with appointments. Her name was Glenda. Her daughter's name was Allie.

Bing leaned on the counter to complete the questionnaire she had given him.

"She's not very talkative, is she?" He nodded at the child engrossed in her book.

"Oh," the receptionist looked with concern at her daughter, who had not looked up, "she has had a bad summer." She lowered her voice. "Her father was killed in a Jeep accident at the end of June."

"I'm sorry, I—"

"No, that's all right. I mean, we were several years divorced, but he mostly had custody of Allie, and she adored him. Now she's come to live with me full-time, but I don't have anyone to look after her before school starts. I had a woman, but she's been ill—"

At that moment, a large woman with a painfully fixed expression came out of the inner office, a patient who had finished a little ahead of schedule, and Bing was able to take the rest of her time. The dentist put in a temporary filling and told Bing he needed a crown.

"See if Glenda can get you in sometime next week," he said.

When Bing returned to the office the following Friday, he brought Glenda a small metal box with a magnet attached to it.

"This should solve the problem," he told her. "Just slip a spare key in this and put it somewhere on the underside of the car."

The key box was inexpensive. He had several lying about his office since he had used them as a promotion at one time, giving them away to prospective customers.

"It's very thoughtful of you," Glenda said. "Thanks."

She now looked at him with interest. Bing had always known instinctively that women appreciated such little things and imbued them with far more importance than the effort warranted.

He did them almost thoughtlessly. It was a gift, as natural to him as breathing.

He was the only one in the office—except for her daughter—and while he waited for his appointment, they talked quietly together. She confided to him that the dentist was irritated by Allie's being in the office. Though the girl caused no disturbance or interruption of care, he considered it unprofessional that she was there hour after hour. Just the sight of her annoyed him.

"Would Allie like to come up to the house I'm building and spend some time?" Bing asked in one of those inspired moments that was not completely selfless. "It's virtually finished and not dangerous. She could help me to do some staining if she's a mind to."

Glenda thought that a fine idea, though Allie seemed less enthusiastic. Nevertheless, the next morning Glenda brought her to the job site.

"If she gets in the way, just send her back to the office," she said anxiously.

The girl didn't get in the way, and after a couple of hours, Bing forgot that she was there. She sat in a corner of the vaulted living room and read her book.

He worked steadily, unmindful of the time. He looked up in surprise to find the receptionist standing in the doorway, a package of fast food in her hands.

"I thought we could all have lunch together," she said.

Bing took them out on the deck where they had a fine view of Boulder, and they ate their lunch. He answered questions about the house, which were asked admiringly. When they finished, he took them on a tour of it, from the walk-in basement to the cupola at the very top which gave a commanding view of Boulder and the plains beyond, pale yellow and brown and creamy in the summer sun. It was a well-built house, and he was proud of it.

Glenda hurried back to work, and Bing and Allie followed her as far as the front steps. Bing asked the girl if she would like to help with the staining. She shook her head.

She picked at the trunk of one of the pine trees which grew at the edge of the walk, and it released a layer of bark to her nervous fingers like a scab. The layer beneath was a paler shade of reddish brown, almost pink, almost the color of flesh.

"My mother doesn't need another boyfriend," she said harshly. "My mother has plenty of boyfriends."

"I see."

The girl left the tree to twist her book in her hands uncomfortably, as if she was aware that she had been too bold.

"I like your house," she said.

"Thank you."

They did not speak again until Glenda came to collect the child. As they made their way down the walk, Allie turned to Bing.

"Can I come tomorrow?" she asked.

He was surprised. "Of course."

Her mother gave him a quick smile, and then they were gone.

That had been weeks ago. Weeks before the Simpsons' party. Glenda managed to come every lunch hour that Allie was with him at the house. Which was most days. Occasionally she took her daughter off with her, but more often she brought them sacks of sandwiches that she had made at home and jars of lemonade or sun tea, and they sat on the deck in the shade of the large pines.

She brought Allie quite early on Thursdays. Thursday mornings the dentist did most of his surgery, and he wanted Glenda there long before the office opened to receive the first patient. Sometimes Bing would find Allie there ahead of him.

Bing heard the garage door open and close. He looked at the clock on the nightstand. It was almost eight. Carol liked to drive to a stretch of road east of town where the traffic was not heavy. She preferred to run there rather than on the bike trails, which were common in and around Boulder. She said she'd rather cope with cars than chance being run down by a cyclist. There were so many in Boulder.

He pictured her driving to the place from which she always began, parking the car beneath the old cottonwood, doing her stretching exercises. She had taken him with her once, trying to interest him in running. She had her route planned, her mile markers. Her wrist watch with the timer. The earphones which were connected to the CD at her belt. She liked running to specific rhythms. She ran almost every other day, weather permitting.

He left the bed and went to the large walk-in closet which was hers. Carol's hair was thin, and she had a number of wigs which she used to conceal this minor defect. He made his selection and put it on and looked at himself in the full-length mirror. The fibers of the wig were short and softly curling and reddish brown—like Carol's own hair. It fit him well enough, and he was not displeased with his appearance. It was a precaution only. If he was fortunate, he would not be seen.

He put the wig back where he had found it, put on his clothes, and went to work, even though it was Sunday. It was easier to work now, and the pressure he had been feeling in his chest gradually subsided. He did not think of the scene on the deck the night before except to wonder mildly if she might not be meeting him, this man she was involved with, instead of running that morning. He doubted it. There was plenty of time to be with him while Bing was safely on the job during the week. Surely she wasn't that reckless. Yet.

Thursday came, and he was tense with excitement. He felt poised on the edge of unknown but limitless possibilities. Carol had been distant to him during the week, but he realized that was the way she had been treating him for some time.

He got up before she did, but that was usual—except for the weekends. He collected the wig and a tennis bag and drove to the parking lot behind the red brick building. There were only three cars in it at that hour, one of which was the old Buick.

It took him only a moment to find the little metal box and the key inside. He started the car and moved it, putting the truck in its stead. He got back into the Buick and drove it carefully around the building. His heart was racing. He pulled to the side of the street, looked about him, and put on the wig. Then he drove to that stretch of road along which Carol usually ran.

He was now very nervous. And very afraid. Afraid of being caught and the consequences of being caught in equal measure. He had read what happened to men his size in prison. He was almost as afraid of those things as he was of failure. But not quite.

So that when he saw her BMW parked in its accustomed place beside the road beneath the large tree, he did not slow the old car, but built its speed, finally bringing her into view: the tall, rangy figure in the red jogging shorts and bright yellow shirt, moving along the road with smooth, rhythmic strides.

Now it was a question of reflexes. There was no longer any time to think. He was doing over sixty-five when he swerved across the road to strike her. She seemed to rush at him, then the car shuddered at the impact and skewed toward the fence and field. It was only with difficulty that he got it back onto the pavement. By the time he looked up at the mirror, he could see nothing but the cloud of dust he had thrown up from the shoulder.

His mouth was dry and he clung to the steering wheel with hands that felt like great numbed claws. He slowed the car and

turned off the main road to follow the first of the byways which would take him back to town. But first he stopped the car and got out. He felt lightheaded and weak.

The left fender was badly dented and the headlight was broken, but he didn't see any blood, although he had been prepared to deal with that. There were rags and a bottle of solvent in the tennis bag, but there appeared to be no need. He got back into the car just as an old pickup turned onto the road. He made himself drive slowly back onto the pavement and put his hand to his face as the truck passed him. He saw only a few cars on his way back to Boulder and listened for the sound of the sirens to unwind, but the silence of the morning seemed undisturbed.

Now there were more cars in the parking lot at the back of the office building, but the only people he saw were just going into the building. He waited for them to disappear inside, then backed his truck out of the space in which the Buick had been parked and put the Buick back. He locked it and replaced the key in its metal box beneath the car.

He looked about him but didn't see anyone. He clawed the wig off his head and put it underneath the seat of the truck along with the tennis bag. Then he backed the truck into the left front of Glenda's car. At the sound of the collision, he glanced nervously at the building, but no one came to the door. He got out, surveyed the damage, and took the note out of his pocket. He pretended to write it on the spot in case anyone should be watching, but he had been afraid that his hands would be shaking too much to do a proper job of it, so he had carefully printed it out before he left the house.

It said: "I just backed into your car. Sorry. Some people saw me and think I'm leaving my name and address. I'm not."

He slipped the note under a windshield wiper, returned to the truck, and drove around and up the hill to the job site.

They would look at his truck and the Volvo at home in his garage. Of course they would. But they would find nothing amiss with the Volvo and only a minor scrape on the rear of the bumper of the truck.

He tried to get some staining done, but he was too agitated to be patient and was doing a poor job. He wondered vaguely where Allie was. She hadn't missed many days coming to the site, but he had the vague idea that school was about to start. Or had started.

He decided to start cleaning up the site. That was where the

sheriff found him, putting the small scraps of paper and wood into the garbage bag. Their next-door neighbor had told him where Bing was likely to be.

The rest of the day was a swirl of confusion. Identifying Carol's body. Making arrangements with the funeral home. Talking to a reporter from the *Camera*. Calling her family and friends. One of the neighbors came over and helped him go through her address book. It was long after dark before he was left alone. He poured himself a large scotch but couldn't relax, even then. He felt as though he might never sleep again. He stayed up for a long time, buoyed on the current of his daring.

It was almost noon of the next day by the time he went back to the job site. He wouldn't be working there for a while—there was too much to be done in settling Carol's affairs—and he wanted to be sure things were put away properly and that the house was locked. He supposed it was the last house he could feel good about. It was built to last a long time.

He was tired but restless. There was so much to be done. So much yet to be done. He felt as though one chapter of his life should be closing while another opened, but that was not the case. There was a nagging sense of something left undone. Of incompleteness. It made him edgy and impatient.

He frowned as he looked up from where he was crouched on the deck, putting the cans of stain beneath the tarp.

"The door was open," the sheriff explained. "I guess you didn't hear me call."

Bing shook his head. "Is something wrong?"

The sheriff frowned, but he had taken off his hat. Bing thought that was a good sign. The sheriff was a tall, solid-looking man. The band of skin on his forehead was lighter where it had been protected by the hat.

"Step over here, if you would, Mr. Heil," he said and leaned on the rail of the deck, looking down the wooded slope to the parking lot and the red brick building beyond it.

"I guess she's right enough in that," the man said, looking over the side.

"I'm sorry," Bing said in the voice he was attempting to modulate toward the grief appropriate to his circumstance, "I don't follow you."

"You can see the parking lot pretty well from here." He turned then to look at Bing and replaced his hat. "There's a girl and her

mother waiting for us outside. The girl says she saw you back your truck into her mother's car yesterday morning. I suppose that would be a little after your wife was killed."

Allie. Who would have been waiting for him. And he had forgotten her. As though she were beneath notice. As though she didn't matter.

Bing finished stowing the cans of stain on the deck. He went into the house and waited for the sheriff to follow him inside. Then he locked the sliding glass doors behind them. He took pride in the way they moved smoothly, heavily into place, the firm, sure click of the lock.

"She says she often has to wait for you on Thursdays," the sheriff continued. "When you didn't come right away, she walked around and climbed up to the deck to wait in the sun. That's when she said she saw you get out of her mother's car, get into your truck, and back it into her."

They had come across the luxuriant length of the living room to the front door. It was a heavy, solid door of teak stained the rich color of pine bark one layer down. It was carved and paneled and inset with a vertical slot of leaded, beveled glass at eye level. Below that was a heavy knocker in brass which matched the massive door handle. Bing motioned the sheriff over the threshold, then stood trying to remember if all the upstairs windows were closed.

The sheriff cleared his throat. Far down the walk, through the trees, Bing could see Allie and her mother standing next to his truck. They were talking to a man from the sheriff's office. Glenda had her arms crossed and even from the distance seemed tense and defensive.

"Kid might have made it up," the sheriff said. "Girls that age . . . You do know her, don't you?"

Bing nodded. He knew. He had only to laugh it off. To say how Allie never seemed to like him. How what she had seen she had fabricated. It wasn't so very difficult. The sheriff didn't want to believe her. Why would someone like Bing, someone responsible and law abiding, leave the scene of such a minor accident?

But he found himself unable to answer. When he did not respond, the sheriff's eyes, which had been diffident when he had begun to phrase his questions—conscious of the awkwardness of the situation, the pain of the newly bereaved—began to become thoughtful, then hardened as the lawman began to think why

Bing might have staged the accident below. Hardened until they looked like agates. Like shooters.

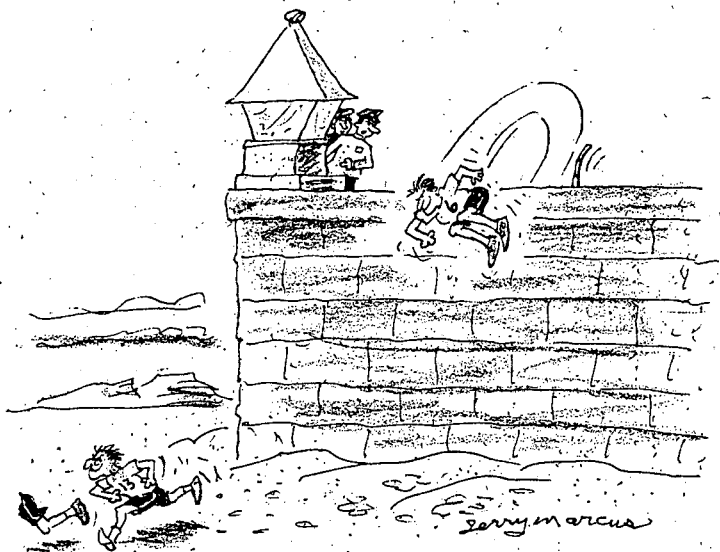
Bing looked down the walk to where the girl was standing with her mother and the sheriff's man, her body frail but rigid. She seemed to him as though she were standing on the edge of a pool of deep water, ready to back away.

Then it had passed, that moment during which he could have smoothly denied her story, denied it all in his diplomat's voice, faintly edged with contempt. When he could have posited a different kind of reality.

The sheriff called brusquely down the hill, told the man standing there to take the woman's Buick in. He wanted the damaged front fender gone over, inch by inch. And Bing supposed they would find something there that he hadn't seen. Some trace of blood or fiber. If not that, they would surely find the metal key box with the name and telephone number of his construction company.

He had always thought of that road of his childhood as just a place, a way to get from that smelly, dank pool of water back to the farmhouse, to comfort and safety. Now he realized that it stretched far and away and had taken him into an unknown country.

As the uniformed man at the foot of the hill hurried away, the girl turned her pale face to look toward them, but she was too far away for Bing to read the expression there. ●



"I warned the warden about having a pole vaulting team!"



SINK OR SWIM

When Natalie pleaded with Frank to go sailing
He told her he knew about boating. He LIED
Then planted himself with a beer, by the rail
Till Natalie hoisted him over the side.

How lucky for Frank he was once a fair swimmer
And able to move with a beer in his hand!

He managed to flounder, with hopes growing
Till suddenly, there in the distance was land!

The island was hopelessly small and deserted,
But Frank, optimistic, had guts through and through
And refusing to whine or become disconcerted
Relied on his habit of making things do.

He'd always loved clams, and the holes he saw
Gave promise of food—though with cooking
And he scouted for wood till his arches were lashed
To bind with his clothing for building a boat.

Unaccustomed to labor, he soon became sleepless
His back and his shoulders were blistered with sweat
His lack of a house left him lonesome and weak
He counted the number of days without rain.

So he searched all around for a trace of a servant
Named Friday, to guide him and lend him a hand
But intent though he was and incredibly fervent
He failed to discover a print in the sand.

Poor Frank is still waiting. The clams are depleted
The boat he was building developed a leak.

He's sunburned, discouraged and almost defeated
And hunger has left him disabled and weak.

He dreams about Nat, with a thirst for repayment
(He long ago finished his bottle of Bud),

And vows, from the depths of his sad disarray
That when he gets seaborne her name will be

by Katherine H. Brooks



TRICKS OF THE TRADE

by David Williams

By and large, Mr. Arnold Fiskin was an honest, hard-working man who followed the normal practices of his calling. Small, bald, roundish, and nearly sixty, appearing always a touch nervous, with an honest gaze and impeccable manners, Mr. Fiskin was a dealer in antiques, an activity, it must readily be admitted, in which a degree of artfulness is expected and accepted.

It was a Sunday in mid February when Mr. Fiskin made a second visit to a property on the outskirts of Lower Hartley. In his view—partly tutored, partly instinctive—Mucklebury Lodge was the only habitation in the Devon-

shire village that showed promise of yielding reward for valuable time expended. A solid, dignified stone-built house of only modest proportions, it dated probably from around the middle of the eighteenth century and was showing recent signs of deterioration that had to mean its present occupiers were hard up—a lot more so than their predecessors, otherwise the place would have fallen down long since.

The tall, double iron gates were rusted, crooked on their hinges, and permanently open before a pitted driveway that wound through a substantial unkempt garden. The porticoed front door, from which the off-white paint was peeling, was flanked by windows on whose frames, unhappily, there was no paint left to peel.

Although no new David Williams novel has appeared in the U.S. since 1992, the author's books are all widely available in the U.K. and Canada. *Dead in the Market* (1996), which features a Welsh policeman, is finding its way to American readers via our northern neighbor. Says the author: "It sounds as if the cross border trade (from Canada) may be reaching prohibition proportions!" ‡

A piece of roof ridge was missing, and several tiles looked to be dangerously askew.

Probably a case of genteel poverty, Mr. Fiskin had diagnosed on his brief visit the day before, with the rider that if the occupants of the house were feeling the pinch, they were making some effort to maintain their dignity. The net curtains, closed at every downstairs window, were clean, the front steps were swept, and the brasswork on the door had been recently polished.

When, on his first visit, Mr. Fiskin's knock had produced no response, he had attempted a cursory examination of the ground-floor interior of the house. It had been an unsatisfactory attempt because of the net curtains, but he thought he had discerned enough to support his initial confidence.

Today, when Mr. Fiskin drove his suitably aged Volvo estate car up to the door, he had observed with satisfaction that smoke was rising from one of the chimneys. It was still some time before his knock was answered, by a woman of formidable size and girth, her grey hair swept back in a bun, though a good deal of it had eluded capture, giving her a windswept look. She was wearing steel-framed spectacles with heavy lenses, and she was dressed in layers of unmatched woollens over a long, thick grey skirt. It was difficult to estimate her age—her skin texture, especially that of the cheeks, neck, and mittened fingers, seeming not quite to accord with the hair colour.

"My name is Mr. Arnold Fiskin," the caller announced, removing his tweed hat with a flourish and placing it over his heart as though he was pledging allegiance to something. The hat was a prop he regularly used as an earnest that he subscribed to old-fashioned values. "I called yesterday, but there was no one in. I left my card in the letterbox . . . with a note saying I'd return today? On the off chance?" he ended questioningly, raising his voice a touch for fear that the woman might be hard of hearing since her features had not registered any reaction to his opening words.

"Left a card, you say?" she uttered at last, in a broad Devonian accent. "Ah yes, to be sure. The general did mention someone might be making a call. Better come in then, hadn't you, m'dear." The voice, though uncultured, was melodious, and again seemed somehow younger than the slow-moving body from which it emanated.

Mr. Fiskin wished he could see the woman's eyes properly, but they were shrouded by the spectacles, and then by the dark inte-

rior of the house. He assumed she must be some kind of servant. "Thank you," he replied, promptly stepping inside. "Yes, since I was in the area, it seemed a pity not to make myself known to the, er . . . to General, er . . . ?" he offered tentatively, in the hope of eliciting a name, and with the air more of a visiting clergyman than an avaricious doorstep buyer. He wiped his clean shoes, with prolonged and unnecessary zeal, on the worn coil mat, while making a swift inventory of the hall furniture.

"The general was just going to have his coffee in the drawing room," the woman continued affably. "Expect you'd like some too, wouldn't you?"

"I would indeed. How kind." He was seldom made so welcome. "And what a nice house this is. When I first saw it, I felt instinctively—"

"Mornin' to you. Arthur . . . er, Wiskit, is it?" interrupted the tall stooping figure now framed in an open doorway on the far side of the hall. "Been expectin' you." The clipped moustache and the mannered, nasally diction—not to mention the only near rendering of the caller's name—would have spelled army officer to Mr. Fiskin without prompting. He had begun his adult career as a regular soldier in the infantry—and hated the experience.

"Arnold Fiskin, actually, sir," he now corrected pointedly, "of Arnold Fiskin Limited, fine antiques and pictures, London." He held out his hand. London was as much of an address as he ever supplied at the start on these occasions. The card he had left offered no more—not even a telephone number.

"How d'you do. General Sir Percival Amhurst-Cole. Retired now, of course," the other man provided, examining the proffered hand before taking it, as though checking it for contaminants. Afterwards he pushed both his own hands back into the pockets of the long fawn cardigan, making it a good deal longer in the process. He turned about and limped slowly back into the room, worn slippers flapping across bare floorboards. "Come inside," he called over his shoulder. "And take a pew. Mrs. Trevenion bringing us coffee, is she?"

"Thank you, Sir Percival, yes," Mr. Fiskin replied deferentially, bringing up the rear, and unsure whether he should address his host as that or as General.

The drawing room was, if anything, darker than the hall had been. It was a dull day outside, and the still-closed net curtains deepened the funereal atmosphere. Mr. Fiskin was just able to make out that under a shock of snow-white hair the general's

tanned face was quite unusually leathered, to a degree that even suggested intervention by some pockmarking type of disease. Not that the dealer was hugely interested in the physical characteristics of either the general or his housekeeper, if that's what she was. He was already too concerned—and dispirited—over the house contents.

Mr. Fiskin had rarely entered a home of apparent substance that was so wholly lacking in any vestige of tasteful furnishings. This room, like the hall, looked as though it had been fitted out with rejects from a junk shop. Even what might once have been half good was severely damaged, like the large Victorian glass-fronted bookcase on one wall, bereft of books, and with one of its lower doors entirely missing—or the sofa on which the general had motioned the visitor to sit, and whose loose cover proved to be hiding a collection of springs that were looser still.

That there had once been pictures in the room was clear from the light, oblong patches on the wallpaper where they had once hung. But the promising impression that the dealer had gleaned through the windows the day before was to this point proving to be the product of his own wishful thinking. He had seldom been in such a cold house either. Wherever the smoke-producing fire was burning, it wasn't in the drawing room. The only evidence of heating arrangements here was a single-element, old-fashioned electric fire set close to the armchair the general was making for, but it wasn't switched on.

"Have you lived here long, sir?" Fiskin had decided to compromise on the form of address for the time being.

The general lifted his eyebrows as though the question surprised him. "Yes. Since around doomsday. Place is denuded now, as you can see. Most of the old furniture's been sold. Upstairs is worse than down here. Everything had to go for death duties." He lowered himself into the sagging chair while his visitor wondered how anything upstairs could be worse than the sofa.

"You're looking to buy antiques, of course," the general went on. "Won't get any here, I'm afraid. More's the pity. I could use some extra loot." He sighed heavily. "Yes, all the good stuff went years ago. Before my dear wife passed on, God rest her." He blew his nose with a piercing high trumpeting noise into a large red-silk handkerchief, and then took several seconds to recover from the effort. "Still, glad to see you," he added, breathless still, but with a careful smile—as though a less careful one might split the parched, grooved skin of his cheeks. "I don't entertain anymore.

Don't know a soul in the village nowadays either, not that I'd want to. They all probably think I died years ago. Or moved." The second possibility seemed in some way to console him.

"Indeed," Fiskin responded with a nod. "The character of the English rural village has changed beyond belief, and not for the better, I'm afraid," he continued—loftily for someone who lived in a high-rise London flat near Vauxhall Bridge. At least, he thought, the old boy would be a willing seller of anything he owned that was worth having, except there was nothing of the kind in sight. "I buy all kinds of valuables, of course," he went on, still hopefully. "Ornaments and jewellery, as well as furniture and pictures. Quite often an owner's got a little gem or two tucked away somewhere. Things that everybody's forgotten about. In the attic or the cellar." His last words were put more as a question than a comment.

The general lifted himself an inch from the seat, loosened his trousers by tugging at their front, then dropped back onto the creased cushions with a satisfied grunt, his eyes on Fiskin's throughout. "Can't believe we've got any gems left here," he said, breathless again from the fresh exercise, but now brushing at the front of his cardigan. "Still, you're welcome to look for yourself after we've had our coffee. Don't expect me to go round with you, though. And I'd advise you to wear household gloves if you're going in the attic. Damned dirty up there. Least it was the last time anybody looked, and that was probably a decade ago. Oh, thank you, Mrs. Trevenion. Mr., er . . ." His nose creased. "Mr. Riskit will need a pair of household gloves."

"Very good, General," said Mrs. Trevenion, who had just appeared with a tray of coffee things which she placed carefully on the baize-covered bridge table to the general's right.

With an inward sigh, Fiskin admitted to himself that a household unable to produce even two cups, two saucers, and a plate for biscuits with no single piece of china matching another had to be truly on its uppers. Even the biscuits were broken.

"There's just these few things that took my eye, Sir Percival," the dealer said when he reentered the room an hour later carrying a large open hatbox in his arms. "I found most of them in the attic, mixed up with the junk there."

The general took off his glasses and put down the dog-eared copy of *Country Life* he was reading. "So it was just as you said,

my dear chap. Any good, are they?" he completed, with more of diffidence than hope in the tone.

Fiskin placed his burden on the bridge table, even more carefully than Mrs. Trevenion had done with the coffee tray earlier. He extracted his small hoard of finds from the box, then took off the cotton gloves he had been loaned. Although old, the gloves had been spotlessly clean when given to him, in contrast to the condition they were in now. He placed them beside the two tarnished, silver-plated eggcups, the gilt-framed miniature watercolour of a squinting King Charles spaniel, the cracked Waterford glass decanter, and the translucent bowl. "I took you at your word, General," he said. "Had a pretty thorough rummage around."

"Absolutely, my dear fellow. So what have you got?" The general leaned forward, his eyebrows moving up and down as he surveyed what was on the table. "Hm. Can't believe those eggcups are worth anything. I remember the dog picture. Nobody liked it, including the dog." He looked up and gave a bronchitic chuckle before returning to his examination. "Thought we'd thrown away that decanter. Still worth a bob or two, is it? What's that dish thing? Don't remember seeing that before."

"It's a small serving dish, General, almost certainly jade," the dealer replied to the general's question. He always kept as near to the truth as he could.

"Valuable, is it?"

Fiskin was doing his best to suppress his excitement. Once in a while, on his provincial tours, he came upon an item that compensated for all the time and money he spent knocking on doors, suffering rebuffs, spending uncomfortable nights in cheap lodgings, battling against wind, rain, and snow, and most of the time to little purpose and less profit. Eleven years ago, for instance, he had paid £50 for what he thought just might have been an oil sketch by John Constable; after experts had proved that it was, he sold it for £20,000. He had taken a risk on that oil sketch, which might have proved to have been worthless. He knew too little about pictures to rely solely on his own judgement. But jade was quite a different matter.

After leaving the army and drifting from job to job, Mr. Fiskin had ended up as general dogsbody in the hallowed Bond Street premises of Lichter's, Europe's most respected dealers in fine jade. He had spent ten years at the firm, rising to a position of minor responsibility. It was after this that he had set up on his own as an antique dealer. Rarely since then had he come upon any excep-

tional item of jade, and hardly ever had he been in a position to buy even averagely good examples. Yet what he had just placed on the general's coffee table was one of the most exquisite, unspoiled nephrite jade serving bowls of immense antiquity that it had ever been his privilege to hold. There was no doubt in his mind, either. Mr. Fiskin knew jade better than he knew his own wife.

"It's quite valuable, General, yes," he responded now. "Depending on its age and . . . er . . . You've no idea where it came from? I found it in a wooden box inside one of the cabin trunks. I had a lot of difficulty getting the trunk open."

"Ah, you would." The general's eyes lit up. "Those trunks belonged to my grandfather, the admiral. Haven't been opened for years. Always thought they were full of clothes. Yes, he was Royal Navy. China Station. Jade comes from China, does it?"

"Some jade does, yes, General."

"That's it then, isn't it? It's a piece of jade he picked up on his travels. What's it worth?"

Fiskin was pleased about the convincing, uncomplicated provenance of the piece. "I'm not an expert, but I'd say several thousand pounds. Maybe as much as . . . five thousand." He was an expert, and he estimated the right buyer could offer seventy thousand at least for it. "I tell you what, General, you've been so kind and trusting, letting me dig around by myself, I'd like to return the compliment." He paused for a second. "I'm prepared to risk it, go on my judgement, and offer you five thousand cash, on the spot. That's including the other items, of course," he ended earnestly. The other items were worthless.

It was the general's turn to ponder. "Very decent of you, Fuskit. Very decent indeed," he responded after some moments, then made movements with his closed lips before he opened them again to say: "But I don't want you to take a risk like that. And I don't feel I can afford to either. What if the thing is worth even more than you think? I feel we ought to get a . . . a really expert opinion." The tightened lips wobbled again before he added: "There's an antique dealer I know in Exeter. Used to handle a lot of ivory, that sort of thing, I remember. Bet he knows about jade. Think I'll ask him over tomorrow and—"

Fiskin's stomach gave an anguished heave. "I can do better than that, General," he interrupted. "Give me a minute, and I'll get onto a friend of mine at his home, on my car phone. He's a world authority on jade. If I describe the dish to him, I'm sure he'll be able to price it. Of course, he may say it's worth less than I've

offered, in which case . . .” He gave a theatrically ominous frown, leaving the sentence uncompleted. It was a ploy that sometimes worked—but not on the general.

“Well, that’d be my bad luck, wouldn’t it, Fostik? And I wouldn’t dream of holding you to your offer if your friend says the thing’s only worth a few hundred,” he replied. “No, by all means, go and phone him. I’ll wait here for the verdict.”

The dealer was not away long. He sat in the car with the doors closed, pretending to use the phone, while he feverishly planned his best policy. It was clear he had to offer the general an enticing price to avoid the Exeter dealer being involved. The question was still, how much.

It was two weeks and a day later that Mr. Fiskin again appeared on the doorstep of Mucklebury Lodge. This time he was accompanied by a thickset man of medium height, in his mid forties. Their knock was answered by a pretty young woman with tousled blond hair who was dressed in a roll-necked fisherman’s knit sweater with pushed-back sleeves, and a pair of tight black slacks. “Hi,” she said brightly, looking from the men to the Ford parked in the drive.

“Good afternoon, miss. I’m Detective Inspector Merchant, Hampshire CID,” said Mr. Fiskin’s companion, who had darting eyes and an understanding smile. He showed the woman his warrant card.

“You’re a bit west of your beat,” she observed.

“That’s true, miss. Though it didn’t take us that long from Winchester using the motorways. This is Mr. Arnold Fiskin. He’s helping us with our inquiries into the theft of a valuable jade bowl and its subsequent attempted sale. We’re hoping to see General Sir Percival Amhurst-Cole. Is he in?”

“General who?” the woman seemed mystified.

Merchant repeated the name.

“There’s no one of that name here,” she answered, shaking her head. “Our name’s Hoplake. That’s Peter my husband, and me, I’m Trudy Hoplake. I think you’ve got the wrong house.”

“No, this is the house all right,” said Mr. Fiskin, who was studying Mrs. Hoplake intently.

“Do you have a housekeeper called Mrs. Trevenion, ma’am?” the inspector enquired.

“No. We have no housekeeper. Couldn’t afford—”

“Who is it, Trudy?” interrupted a dark-haired, gangling young

man in check shirt and yellow corduroys. He had appeared from behind her in the hall.

Mrs. Hoplake introduced the newcomer as her husband. It was after she had explained their callers' business to him that Inspector Merchant asked if they might come in. Peter Hoplake shrugged. "If you think it'll do any good," he agreed grudgingly.

"Mr. Fiskin says he was admitted to this house mid morning, on Sunday, February nineteenth. That's two weeks ago yesterday, sir," said the inspector. "I'd like him to identify the rooms he was in for me."

Hoplake frowned. "Two weeks ago yesterday? But you couldn't have been here that morning, Mr. Fiskin. We were out the previous morning, but on the Sunday we were in all day. I was working in the study—"

"And I was busy in the kitchen from eleven onwards, making cakes and getting the lunch. We had roast beef and all the trimmings," put in the ebullient Mrs. Hoplake.

"I was first shown into the room over there," Mr. Fiskin insisted. Ignoring what the Hoplakes had said, he had moved past them and made for the drawing-room door.

"Ah, well, that proves it's the wrong house," countered Hoplake. "That door's kept locked by the landlord, and we don't even have a key to it."

"Landlord, sir?" questioned the inspector. "You rent the house, do you?"

"That's right. Took it on a monthly basis last June. It'd been on the market for ages. It's totally unsaleable, or even rentable on a commercial basis. The owners let us have it cheap, basically to keep out the vandals until they can find a buyer. Suits us pretty well. I'm a playwright and TV scriptwriter. Need plenty of hush. This place is glorious in the summer. Freezing in the winter, like now, of course, but we only use three rooms: the study, the kitchen, and one bedroom. My wife's usually away in the daytime."

"I work freelance for cosmetic companies as an in-store demonstrator. It's not my proper job, but it brings in some lolly," Mrs. Hoplake provided, a touch regretfully.

"But I think I'd be right in saying your proper job is acting, isn't it, ma'am?" said the inspector. "I've seen you on the stage. Both of you."

Mrs. Hoplake gave a quick glance at her husband, then answered. "How clever of you, Inspector." If she had at first seemed fazed by the question, she was obviously flattered at the

recognition. "You probably saw us when we were in the Wessex Players, a touring rep. Great little company—before it folded. We often played Winchester."

"Shakespeare in the open air, schools, and stately homes. I remember, ma'am. And you were very good, too." The inspector nodded at her approvingly before asking her husband, "So which of these rooms is the study, sir?"

"Through there." Hoplake pointed to a door on the right. "Want to see?"

The policeman turned to the deeply silent Fiskin. "Did you go in there, sir?"

"No, I didn't. The door was locked. The general said it was an empty room. And I didn't go in the kitchen either because he said there'd be nothing of any interest and Mrs. Trevenion objected to outsiders being there."

"What about our bedroom, Mr. Fiskin?" It was Mrs. Hoplake who asked the question, in an overly indulgent tone.

"I went in all four of the unoccupied bedrooms. They only had odd bits of worthless furniture in them. All junk."

"Ours is the one at the top of the stairs on the right," said Peter Hoplake.

Mr. Fiskin was now studying Hoplake's face as searchingly as he had done Mrs. Hoplake's earlier. "The general said that was his room," he responded. "And not to go in there because it was too untidy, with nothing for me in it." He swallowed and turned to the inspector. "As a matter of fact, I did try to look in, but the door was locked."

"Incredible. It's never locked. And did our phantom housekeeper have a bedroom?" asked Mrs. Hoplake, still humouring Mr. Fiskin.

"Mrs. Trevenion? No, she didn't," he answered. "The general explained she lived in the village."

"Then shouldn't you try to find her there?" demanded Hoplake, his tone not nearly as understanding as his wife's.

"We did, sir," replied the inspector, with a glance at Mr. Fiskin. "We asked several people, but no one seems to have heard of her. Or the general, come to that."

"That doesn't surprise me. The house is owned by a family called Edwards. I believe most of them live in Wales."

"Mr. Fiskin had the same trouble when he asked in the village about who was living in the house. That was on his first visit. On the day before he says he gained admittance to the house."

"When I expect he found nobody knew our name either. Is that what you discovered today, too, Inspector?" Hoplake asked.

"It was, sir, yes."

"That's because we don't fraternise at all. We don't use the village store even, because it's a ripoff." Hoplake paused briefly before addressing Mr. Fiskin directly. "I don't suppose you went in the attic here, by any chance?" he said.

"Yes. It's where I found the jade bowl we're here about. It was in an old cabin trunk belonging to the general's grandfather. He was an admiral. On the China Station," he completed, it seemed somewhat lamely, though it could have been because he was still preoccupied with something else.

Trudy Hoplake let out a giggle, then quickly covered her mouth with her hands. "Oh, I'm so sorry, Mr. Fiskin," she cried, "but it does all sound so unlikely to us." She was still doing her best to suppress her amusement as she went on. "You see, the attic is locked as well. The keys are kept by the agents in Exeter. If we absolutely have to go in any of the locked rooms, one of their representatives has to be present. It's a terrible ritual when it does happen. Like when Peter thought there was a wasps' nest up there. The old boy they send is so meticulous. Except that time he got locked in the attic with the wasps. The draught up the stairs blew the door shut. It was a scream. I mean, he wasn't in any danger because there weren't any wasps after all. But he'd left his bunch of keys in the—"

"Look, why don't you both sit down and tell us exactly what's supposed to have happened in detail," Hoplake had cut in sharply on his wife. "Maybe we can throw some light on the problem after all."

They were all in the study by this time, a cosy room in its own way, gloriously untidy, with a log fire burning briskly in the grate. There were books and bits of manuscript stacked everywhere, including the floor, with a desk computer and a printer contrasting with the decrepit-looking desk—and the even more decrepit armchair behind it which had immediately captured Mr. Fiskin's full attention. The two visitors took the upright chairs that Hoplake had just cleared of books and papers, while Trudy Hoplake perched herself on a corner of the desk.

The inspector cleared his throat. "Ten days ago, Mr. Fiskin left a valuable antique jade bowl at Christie's in London. It was to be auctioned by them next month. He instructed that a reserved price should be put on it of sixty thousand pounds. After he left, the alert lady in charge of cataloguing the sale thought she recog-

nised the item. She was right. It happened it had been revalued by the firm last year, for insurance purposes. Property of Sir Paul Fitzammon, the industrialist, and kept in his country house, Charwood Hall, near Winchester. Sir Paul and his wife have been in America since the middle of February, but a check was made with the gardener and his wife, she's the housekeeper, and then with Sir Paul himself by phone. It seems the bowl had been stolen since he and Lady Fitzammon were last in the house on February seventeenth."

"Straight burglary, was it?" asked Hoplake.

"Seems so, sir, and we believe we know how and when it was done. Nothing else was missing, which is probably why the absence of the bowl was overlooked by the couple. They live in a cottage in the grounds, not the house itself. Sir Paul has a large collection of jade which he keeps in locked glass display cabinets. It's a well-known collection, like other things in Charwood Hall, which is open to the public several times a year, for charity. Oh, and they even have theatricals in the long gallery at Christmas. Perhaps—"

"Yes. We've played Charwood Hall, Inspector. But in the garden, in the summer," said Hoplake in a matter-of-fact voice.

"Well, I never. Anyway, one of the display cabinets had been neatly forced. The other items in it had simply been moved around slightly to disguise the gap."

"Doesn't the house have an alarm system?" questioned Mrs. Hoplake.

"Yes, ma'am. But it was being updated at the time, along with the electrical wiring of the whole house. It's now pretty certain the thief was a man in overalls, carrying a clipboard and a tool case, who walked in early on Saturday the eighteenth. The people from the electrical contractors assumed he was from the alarm company, except no one from the alarm company was supposed to be there that day. It was all pretty cool, really. And since the loss happened on our patch, it was my job to go to London and find out from Mr. Fiskin how he came by the bowl. His story is—"

"The truth of the matter is, Inspector," Mr. Fiskin interrupted in an uncharacteristically insistent voice, "I bought it in good faith from someone who said he was General Sir Percival Amhurst-Cole in this house two weeks ago."

"Quite so, sir," the policeman agreed, "except the only gentleman of that rank and title died not long ago in retirement, in Florida."

"But presumably you got a bill of sale, Mr. Fiskin?" said Hoplake.

The dealer reddened. "I paid cash, and . . . and there was no receipt."

"How much did you pay?"

"Twenty-five thousand pounds," came the almost whispered reply.

"Wow! D'you always carry that much about you in cash?"

"More, quite often. Cash is . . . is quite common in my trade."

"But not to get a receipt, surely—"

"In this case, I'm afraid, I gave in to the general's plea, his heartfelt plea. He seemed so totally genuine," replied the hapless Mr. Fiskin. "He, er . . . he wanted no record of the sale. He was very anxious to avoid paying capital gains tax on it."

Hoplake shook his head. "Could I ask, is Mr. Fiskin under arrest, Inspector?"

Merchant looked at Mr. Fiskin. "He's not under arrest, no. As I said before, he's helping us with our inquiries into the matter." His voice still made it plain that Mr. Fiskin could hardly be regarded as some innocent kind of witness.

"Poor Mr. Fiskin," said Mrs. Hoplake. "I wish we could be of help. But really, it's a total mystery."

"If you were here," said her husband, "wandering about in rooms that are never used, surely your fingerprints would still be all over the place."

"No, they wouldn't," Mr. Fiskin countered firmly. He had stiffened suddenly and was wearing a determined expression, as though he had just made an important decision. He moved to the edge of his chair and was staring hard at Hoplake. "And you know perfectly well why there'll be no fingerprints of mine here. The general gave me gloves to wear. And I was grateful for them. The place was very dusty. And leaving me to go round on my own was masterly as well. It gave what happened much more believability. It was known I'd be thorough, of course. That I wouldn't miss the jade. Every antique dealer is thorough." He took a deep breath, then went on: "Only it wasn't any general who gave me the gloves, was it? It was you, Mr. Hoplake. You, made up to look like a ninety-year-old, and behaving like one, just as your wife turned herself into an outsized housekeeper. No doubt, when I'd left, you both went round wiping everything I touched before I had the gloves on, and after I'd taken them off. That would have been easy."

"What nonsense—" Hoplake began.

"It isn't nonsense, Inspector," Mr. Fiskin protested. "I'd guess he's just an aspiring playwright, living off his wife's meagre

earnings. They're obviously both out-of-work actors. You recognised them. And lucky for me you did, because they might have gone on fooling me. The impersonations, and the makeup, were brilliant, I give them that. But they're professionals, aren't they? It's obvious to me now what happened. Hoplake, acting this time as an electrician, stole the bowl in Winchester, from a house he's just had to admit he knows. Before he's even worked out a way to dispose of it, difficult with stolen goods of this value, he and his wife get home from Winchester to find I'd come along out of the blue and left my card saying I'd be back. That gave them a day to dress the stage. And I fell for what they did."

"Oh, pull the other one, Fiskin," Hoplake interjected dismissively. "You don't buy any of this, do you, Inspector?"

The policeman folded his arms. "I don't think Mr. Fiskin is through yet, sir. I'd like to hear him out, if you don't mind."

Mrs. Hoplake stood up. "Well, I mind a lot," she put in hotly. "So how is this man supposed to have bought a jade bowl from us here when he's never been inside the house? He can't even identify any of the rooms he says he was in, because he's never been in them. Neither have we. Not most of them. They're permanently locked."

"Except you have keys to them all, Mrs. Hoplake," said Mr. Fiskin. "You have to have. The chair your husband is sitting in was in the drawing room the day I was here."

"Tosh. It's his favourite chair, and it's always in here. And if it was in the drawing room, how did we get it out?"

"You needed it as a prop to give credence. There probably wasn't an armchair in the drawing room. Everything else there was junk," Mr. Fiskin asserted. Then he turned to the inspector. "I'm positive the Hoplakes have keys to all the rooms."

"How could we?" demanded Hoplake.

"Well, one way was to take wax impressions of them when you locked the agent's man in the attic that time. Before you interrupted her, your overconfident wife was saying he'd left the keys on the outside when the wind conveniently blew the door shut. I think you needed duplicate keys. To see if there was anything worth pinching in any of the rooms. That's why you invented the wasp story."

"Imaginative, but still nonsense," Hoplake responded, but his tone was now more blustering than confident. "I repeat, this man has never been in this house."

"Do you challenge me to prove the opposite, Mr. Hoplake?"

"Certainly, I do."

"Then can we all go upstairs now?"

Hoplake shrugged and looked at his wife. "As you please. But it's not going to prove anything."

A minute later Mr. Fiskin had the group assembled in one of the bedrooms on the next floor. The room was uncarpeted, and what furniture there was in it was arranged haphazardly in the center.

Mr. Fiskin walked over to a large white-painted, bow-fronted chest of drawers. "When I looked in here and saw this piece, I thought it just might be early Georgian, made of mahogany or even rosewood, but painted over by some Victorian half-wit. To make sure, I turned it over, got out my penknife, and cut a small piece off the underside where it wouldn't be seen, or do any real damage. It's quite a common practice in the trade. Doesn't affect the value of a piece like this, though I'm afraid the cutting splintered slightly, leaving a jagged edge. Anyway, I pocketed it, meaning to check on it later. Then, in my excitement with the jade, I forgot it. I'm glad I did. The inspector has it now."

As Mr. Fiskin turned the chest of drawers over, Inspector Merchant took a small transparent evidence bag from his pocket. Removing the two-inch-long sliver of wood from the bag, he knelt down, and first examined the area to which Mr. Fiskin was pointing. Then he glanced up at Hoplake. "I think you'd better come and see this, sir," he said. And while the others watched, he slipped the small, uneven wood cutting onto the abrasion in the painted surface. The fit was perfect.

The inspector got to his feet again and faced Hoplake. "Do you have anything to add to what you've told me already, sir? Or you, ma'am?" he asked, and when there was no immediate response, he added, "Or would either of you like to alter anything you've said?"

"Certainly not," Hoplake replied in an arrogant tone.

"But you do understand, sir, that Mr. Fiskin has just proved he must have been in the house, so that the rest of his story and his conclusions—"

"This is obviously a fit-up," Hoplake shouted, red in the face and looking from the inspector to Mr. Fiskin. "Neither of us will say anything else at all until we have a solicitor present."

"As you please, sir. But I'm afraid I'll have to ask both of you to come back to Winchester police station with me to answer further questions," said the inspector. He turned to Mr. Fiskin. "Have you anything you want to add, sir?"

Mr. Fiskin grinned, fingering the wood cutting in his hand. "Only to thank God, Inspector, for the tricks of the trade." ●

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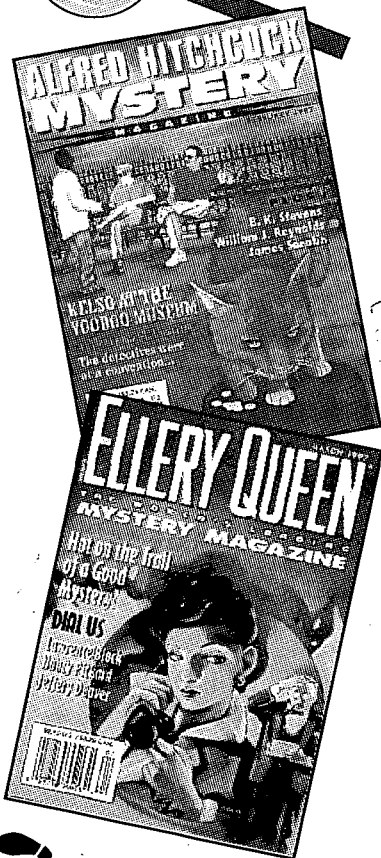
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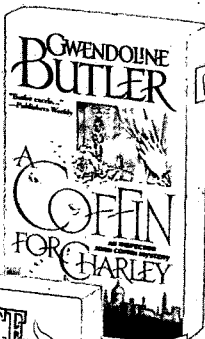
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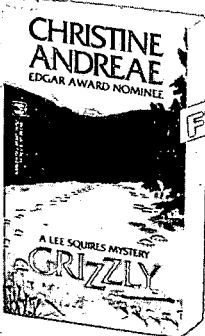
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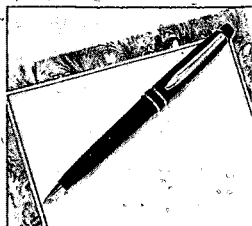
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